

WILLA OKATI IN THE STRANGEST PLACES



In the Strangest Places

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CHAPTER ONE

There is too such a thing as sex on legs. What it looks like might depend on your definition, but hoo boy, does it exist. Everyone's got a type that makes them stop in a crowd, turn around for a better look, and stare until they realize they're embarrassing themselves. Either that, or the wet dream walking turns around to give you the eye or flip you the finger.

Daniel's seen plenty of them. Known some; shared coffee and beers and shots with a few. He's had dates with that type, and he's slept with his fair share. Occasionally, he's moved in with them.

Always moved back out again, though.

Because no matter what that body looks like, without the right kind of inside to match there's no connection. And that's what Daniel craves most, more than a long pair of legs to wrap around him while he pounds himself balls-deep into a willing body. Connection. Body and heart, lust and love, brains and appreciation of the good thing they've got going between them.

Yeah, that's what he wants. He just hasn't found it yet.

Trouble is, at the age of twenty-nine, he's more or less given up hope.

You think it's not easy bein' green? Well, it's not easy being gay, not when you've got the social aptitude of a caterpillar still waiting ten years after his sell-by date to turn into a gorgeous butterfly. Daniel's shy around the men he finds attractive, casting nervous/daring glances up and down their toned bodies and wishing – before he remembers his shaggy black hair that no comb can tame, his glasses; his smile, way too wide and revealing, and his eyes that can't hide a secret. So he looks down over his glass in the bars, keeps to himself, and thinks of what might have been.

He has to be approached.

Funny thing, he's often sought out. By the noisy ones who've caught a glimpse of his ass in his carpenter's jeans, by the quiet ones who see the spectacles and think they've found a kindred soul. By ordinary Joes just out looking for a good time, and by the rare special one that he's thought – just maybe – bears a flicker of that connection he wants.

Those rare few men are the ones he lets buy him another beer, or a shot. Sometimes a glass of wine; it all depends. Maybe they'll slip their hand on his thigh underneath the bar, stroking with suggestive fingers. And depending on how much he's had to drink and where he is, he might follow them to the back stall of the bathroom or he might just let them walk him home. Always his home. He doesn't go to strangers' places... just doesn't.

Twenty-nine years on the planet, fifteen of them knowing what he wants in a partner, and he hasn't struck gold yet. Been fooled a time or two, but never long enough. The tarnish comes out, the gloves come off, and it all ends badly. But now, his heart's finally hardened. He's learned.

And that is why he is not, repeat, not, going to stare at or think about or jump on the gorgeous blond standing impatiently on the walk, smoking a cigarette. Waiting for him.

Even if his dick has different ideas.

Daniel's just now parked his car in front of his new job assignment. He's squeezed in a parallel park between a Harley with more studs and chrome than a Vegas dancer's headdress and a massive DeSoto that probably came over on the Ark. Next to them, his modest pickup truck looks even more beat-up and battered than ever, but that's OK. His carpentry business is finally taking off, and there's a little money in the bank being saved up for a good car, a better home, a nicer class of rats. Until then, he can drive the clunker and he doesn't mind. Much. After so long, the sprung seat's conformed to his shape and it hugs him comfortingly close while he stares at the blond man.

What's up with him? This guy isn't his type. Seriously not his type. Lean and compact, not an ounce of fat, with wiry muscles showing through his tight black T-shirt. Jeans cut to show off every ounce of the - *okay, impressive* - goods. Hair dyed so blond you might as well call it white, spiked up into stakes. Piercings glitter on his face as he sucks his smoke in and expels it back out in thick plumes.

Smoker. Punk. Not his type.

But sex on legs. Oh, yeah. Fucking gorgeous.

Daniel realizes he's going to have to untuck his shirt before he gets out of the car, just to hide a sudden and annoying hard-on.

It's a hell of a way to start the working day.

The blond finishes his smoke and hurls it impatiently at the sidewalk. He glares at Daniel, as if he's felt the weight of brown eyes on him. "Oi," he barks. "You the carpenter or what?" British? Londoner, maybe. Sounds Cockney.

A blush colors Daniel's cheeks. He embarrasses too easily; always has. "That's me," he replies. Realizing he can't be heard, he rolls down the window and says it again.

Blondie's not impressed. "Then what're you hangin' about for? I'm not rolling out a red carpet for you, mate. Get your ass out of the bloody car and trot it inside to work. Paying you, aren't I?"

Smoker. Punk. Mouthy. *So* not his type.

But Daniel still has to wriggle around to untuck his shirt before he gets out of the truck.

Once he's standing, Blondie eyes him up and down. As the man's eyes scorch over every single square inch of Daniel's body, he feels like he's being scanned under a microscope. Being weighed in the balance and found seriously wanting.

It's hot. Hot as hell. Not to mention disturbing and more than just a little creepy. That is tingling he feels on the back of his neck, right?

Finally, Blondie exhales. "Yeah. I reckon you'll do."

Daniel's mouth has always lacked a direct connection to his brain – it's one of the reasons he stays quiet, for fear of sounding like a moron. "You're Mr. Asbury?" he asks. "Ashcroft Asbury?"

Blondie scowls. "Fuck that shit. It's Rack, and don't you forget it. Call me that poncy name one more time and you're out on your ass. Find me another carpenter, I will."

Daniel swallows. OK, touchy subject. Touchy guy. Like dynamite, lots of fire packed into a compact package. "Rack," he repeats numbly. "You're ready inside?"

"Ready for you, anyhow." Rack runs a hand through his wild hair. Daniel can just see the red-green-blue of something underneath, tattooed to the skull itself. Now that gives him the full-body creeps, and he has to restrain a shudder. "Everythin' you made's been delivered. Just wants hammering together."

Daniel swallows. Hammering. Damn, what's wrong with him today? "Sure," he agrees, throat dry. "Got all my tools. Call me the man with the plan."

Rack raises an eyebrow. "Might call you something else, you don't hurry. Time's money. Got to have this place open by Monday if I'm to turn enough profit for rent this month."

Oh! Right. Daniel turns quickly to his truck and yanks out his toolbox. It's a good one, sturdy and red and huge; it holds almost anything you could imagine. Besides carpentry he's, uh... put it to use... on occasion before. Just the clamps. Which he realizes are in there right now.

Shit, he's blushing again. "Okay," he says lamely, getting a grip on the case. "Let's get started."

"About fucking time." Rack shoves himself off the wall and stalks in the door of the small, dimly lit shop.

And Daniel's good. He does not, absolutely not, watch that tight ass glide in those sinful jeans.

Really.

* * *

Inside, it's a mess. Packing crates everywhere, curls of sawdust and Styrofoam peanuts littering the floor so that he has to be careful where he steps. By one wall there's stacks upon stacks of cardboard boxes with medical supply company logos on them. Those alone are neat, as if they've been counted and ordered.

The rest of the place? Chaos.

Daniel stands and stares around in dismay for a moment. God. He's seen it before – moving men are never, never careful transporting the pieces that he works so hard to make – but this is like seeing a jigsaw puzzle you've spent years on smashed by a childish fist.

Rack barely gives it a glance. He hops up on one mid-size box, pulls the cigarette out from behind his ear, and twiddles it in his fingers. "Well?" he says impatiently. "You're the carpenter, the handyman. Get to it with your hands, then."

Daniel bites his tongue. Then he squares his shoulders and looks at the disastrous clutter. This might actually be what he needs. Take his mind off the pierced, punked-out piece of double-sex on legs perched so casually there, watching him.

He rolls up his sleeves and nods. "You got it."

He was right, at least at first. Rack lolls on the counter and watches him, but it's easy enough to let that slide out of his mind when he's putting all his back and the strength in his arms into pushing dividers here and counters there. The satisfying rrrrip of nails coming loose from packing crates, the feel of glossy wood under his fingertips, the satisfaction of muscles first tight then loose and flowing like they're oiled – all of it's a distraction, a good one.

It's a warm day, and he's starting to sweat. He thinks he really should take off his over-shirt, especially now that hard work's done its job on his erection, but... nah. He'll wait until the day's heat peaks.

Little by little, the place starts to take shape. Rack barks out a direction every now and then, mostly "Not that way, you git!" and "Are you blind? That's the wrong way 'round!". Slowly, the place starts looking more like a shop and less like a junkyard.

After he's got four sets of cubicle dividers up and their countertops installed, Daniel pauses for a break. "It's taking shape," he remarks, mopping beads of dampness from his forehead.

"Mmm." Rack's still fiddling with his cigarette, like he's dying to go out and light up, but feels he has to stay and keep an eye on the help. "Not bad."

Not bad. Daniel's glasses are sliding down his nose. He shoves them up with one irritated finger. "Yeah," he says shortly. Pierced. Punk. Mouthy. Asshole. So not his type. And his pulse pounds whenever Rack speaks because he's working hard, that's all. "What next?"

"Next, I take a broom to this lot." Rack slides lithely off the counter, fluid as a panther. Daniel's got a first-class view of legs encased in tight denim, all the way up to an ass that was made – meant - to be squeezed in eager hands. "You? There's more boxes in the back, stuff you didn't make. Fancy uncrating those and hauling them into the small rooms whilst I do this?"

Daniel hesitates. Not his stuff, not in his contract. But that was almost... a polite request. He shouldn't. It'll give the guy ideas about free labor. But... "Yeah, sure."

That gets him a smile. The sight of it shocks him down to his toes. Rack's entire face changes when he grins – he looks younger and puckish, instead of sour and nicotine-deprived.

Daniel feels a prickle of warmth run down his spine... and further. Timing perfect as usual, his cock springs back to life and nudges at the roughness of his jeans like a crazy dog: *Want out! Want to play now! Can-we-can-we-can-we?*

Right about then is when Daniel starts to doubt his sanity. It's happened before, but this time he might have gone completely around the bend.

After all, this Rack guy isn't even gay.

That he knows of.

Although he could be.

Daniel's dick gives a hopeful little twitch, and he winces.

Damn.

His body pretty much goes on autopilot after that, while his mind refuses to shut up. He uncbrates boxes of things he recognizes, things he doesn't, and figures out where they go without being told.

Manual labor is damned difficult with a boner that won't go away no matter what you do. Half-desperate after putting up some cabinets in the small rooms, he wonders if the place has a john, and how keen Rack's hearing is. The guy's given in to his cigarette habit, and between circuits of cleaning crap off the floor, he goes outside to smoke moodily. Maybe if there is a bathroom he can rush in there next time Rack takes a break and whack off. Relieve some of this tension.

It's getting to him. But more, it's bugging him because he can't figure out why the pierced punk is making his body so crazy. He sure isn't won over by that charming personality. And he's nothing like the lovers Daniel's had in the past – the ones who came home with him, the ones who stayed for a while.

Like Alex, the last in his failed string of men. Massive, dark-haired Alex who made Daniel, with all his carpenter's muscles, feel small. He'd had long, elegant fingers and called himself an artist. Soulful eyes you could get lost in, a shy, awkward grin, and a cock any porn star would be proud of. Knew how to use it, too.

Funny how he'd rather bottom than top. But hey, you can't make sense of everything, and Daniel used to get off so hard on pumping that thick prick in both his hands while he drove himself deep into that muscled ass. The few times he'd bottomed, he'd known what it was like to be split open in the best ever way, and come in thick gouts spattering their chests with stickiness.

But there was something in Alex that he always... held back, you know? Like he was David Banner, with the Hulk hiding inside. He always shied away from fights, the fear of losing control loud and clear. He turned down a good job at a greeting card company so that he could spend his days sketching anything and everything - the homeless, the bar crowd, Daniel himself. It left him poor, but proud, and hey, that was good enough.

But as for love and commitment? Forget about it. Once those words were mentioned, he was out the door and on his way to L.A.

Straining to fix a C-clamp in place, it occurs to Daniel: someone like Rack would probably relish a good brawl. He'd figure it would clear the air. And intense as those blue eyes are, once he fell in love he'd stay in love come hell or high water.

Waitasecond! When did he notice the color of Rack's eyes?

Somewhere along the line, he did. Those eyes are hellablue and they go straight through you, picking you apart. Rack's not the kind of guy to stand for any sort of bullshit. That's obvious.

He goes outside to smoke yet another cigarette, and Daniel pauses in his nailing to watch those slim hips sway. He props himself up, one foot against the wall, and it's like watching a statue move. Sunlight glitters off the bars through his eyebrows, the bead through his lower lip, and the — fuck! — twin loops in either earlobe.

Holy hot shit on a clamshell. Maybe he is gay.

Daniel's cock gives a mighty twitch at that thought. His hands clench tight around the smooth handle of his nail gun, gliding on it as if it were a dick in his fingers. He can't pull his eyes away. The body, oh, yeah, he was so aware of that, but now he's realizing that Rack has a beautiful face. Cheekbones you could cut glass with, and a mobile mouth made for kissing. And the piercings just seem to emphasize that. They're not ugly anymore, they're... decoration.

Yeah, he's so going to a special hell for thinking this about his client, but he can't stop staring any more than he could will his dick to go limp. Not gonna happen.

What if... what if...?

Say he was the kind of guy who was brave enough to approach Rack. How would that go down?

Maybe Rack would poke his head through the door of one of these small rooms, checking out the progress made. Daniel might lay his tools down, calm and quiet, and walk over to him as if he had all the time in the world. It's the handyman fantasy, right? The tool belt comes off and the jeans dip a little, just far enough to see the top of the trail of hair leading to his hardened cock.

Rack might be getting ready to say something, but he'd see that, and he'd stop. Blue eyes would look up at Daniel in surprise, and then that fire and excitement would start to burn.

Maybe he'd bend Rack over the counter, peel off those skin-tight jeans, and just push himself in. God, Rack has to be tight, small as the man is. He can almost feel that slick-hot cinch around his cock, the rippling of Rack's muscles around him; can just about hear hoarse cries in that rough Cockney accent telling him *for fuck's sake, keep going, don't stop...*

Daniel opens his eyes.

Yeah, right.

So it wouldn't have to be that way. Maybe they'll stop for a lunch break, and Daniel can oh-so-casually unbutton his shirt. He's just cooling off, he'll say – and he'll see the heat turn on in Rack's face. That pink tongue might just come out to lick those edible lips as he glances down and sees that Daniel's harder than rock, so erect the tip of his cock's almost peeking out the top of his jeans.

Daniel would tilt a glass bottle of something cold to his lips, mouthing it and running his fingers down the sides. He'd watch Rack watching him, swallowing hard. See, from the corner of his eye, a bulge rising hard and fast in Rack's jeans.

He'd lower the bottle, looking over its rim directly into those blue eyes. Challenging them. They'd narrow, and then he'd see that grin again, daring and sexy this time.

And he's not gonna back down from a dare. Maybe he'd reach down and undo the button on his jeans, drawing down the zip ever so slowly, watching the hunger grow on Rack's lean, glittering face...

Daniel sighs. Sure. That'll happen. Guy like Rack? Probably has more on the string than the string has room for.

He's not going to want a shaggy-haired handyman with glasses.

"Oi!" The voice startles Daniel out of his reverie. His hand flies guiltily away from his cock, and he realizes he's been rubbing it absently during his daydreams. Rack's not there to see him do it, thank God, but he's coming close and fast.

Daniel's got his back turned to the small room's door and he's diligently hanging cabinets when the irate Brit looms in the entryway. He stares for a moment, blue eyes flint cold, and announces: "This gonna take all fuckin' day or what?"

Daniel prickles. Hot and cold. What that voice would sound like, giving orders when they were both naked and... whoa, down! Don't go there. "Could be," he answers mildly. "You want them level, don't you?"

"Yeah. Level." Rack drums his fingers against the doorframe. "Usually take that long?"

"If you want it done right."

"Bugger." Rack's leg twitches impatiently. "Got better things to be doin'."

Oh? Oh. Daniel's heart sinks a little, but he makes himself shrug casually. "It's up to you. I don't need a babysitter."

"You bloody need something," Rack mutters under his breath. "Here, do you –"

Daniel interrupts. He can't take another second of that. Perversely, the crankier Rack gets, the more he wants him, and he's gonna come in his pants if he hears one more word. "What kind of shop is this going to be, anyway?" he asks. Some of the stuff he's unpacked was... interesting looking.

"You're not some kind of crazy dentist, are you?"

That startles Rack into barking out a laugh. "Not half!" he exclaims. "You daft? Look around you, mate, this is gonna be a tattoo and piercing parlor."

Ah. Should have known. But it's so... Daniel frowns as he shoots in a finishing nail. "Doesn't look like any tattoo parlor I've ever seen."

"Yeah, and I just bet you've been in a ton."

Self-consciously, Daniel wants to feel of his own twin ear hoops that he got done at the mall. "Okay, not so many."

"Figured." Rack comes in at last, propping himself against a newly installed – thankfully sturdy – counter. "You got to be clean as a hospital, right? So most of the places look like one. Me, I want something with a bit of class. It'll take more cleaning, but this here's my baby. Been saving since I was a snot-nosed London fifth-former for this dream to come true."

Daniel can't really think of anything to say to that. But he understands. High school was around the age he started thinking about working with wood. If Rack feels that same itch to create with his hands, then maybe they do have something in common. Sort of.

Rack's getting more and more jittery by the second. Daniel's about to suggest he go out and have another smoke when the man rolls his eyes, mutters, "Ah, to hell with this," and reaches out to seize him by the wrist. "You, stop what you're doing."

Electric blue eyes pin him down. "You gay?"

Daniel blinks, startled. "How could you –"

"Answer me, fuckin' yes or no." He nods. He's never made a secret of it. Rack groans softly. "Thank god."

What?

The man's other hand comes out to circle his bicep, just as hard, but there's a different feel to this grip. "Not much for the small talk, me," he says bluntly. "Been watching you all morning. Being driven crazy here. So tell me this, and tell me straight 'cause I'm only gonna ask the once: you wanna fuck me?"

Daniel guesses his lips parting and the inrush of air between them are enough answer for Rack, because that's all the encouragement he seems to need. He rushes Daniel, hands on his shoulders, dragging his face down for a kiss that's full of hard lips, teeth, and clashing tongues. He's got a piercing through that, too, and the feel of the warmed metal dancing around Daniel's mouth drags an almighty groan out of him.

Rack pulls back, eyes full of the devil. "You like that, you wait and see what a reverse Prince Albert does for you."

Daniel has no idea what he's talking about. And he doesn't really care. "Get back here," he says hoarsely. "Not done yet."

"Oh, you bet your arse, this luscious arse I've been watching all morning –" hands roughly grab and squeeze it – "we're nowhere near done here yet."

There's more kissing, and oh, hell, does Rack know how to kiss. And Rack has this habit of muttering things into Daniel's mouth that jack up his internal temperature until he thinks he's going to boil over.

"Gonna get you a tongue piercing, too, baby," he growls. "You never felt anything like it. The feel of metal in there when someone's sucking your cock –"

Nimble fingers dip down inside his jeans and give his cock a hard squeeze. "Gonna punch a hole through this, too," Rack warns. "Give you a nice PA. Maybe a guiche. Somethin' I can grab onto while you're ridin' me. And you are gonna ride me. Gonna have my dick so far up your ass you can taste me in the back of your throat."

Which sounds like the best damned idea Daniel's heard all morning. Moaning into that voracious mouth, bucking his hips into the hard grip of Rack's fingers, he tries his best to yank and tug at the black T-shirt keeping him from running his hands all over every inch of that skin.

Rack shakes his head. "Fuck that. Can't wait. Maybe next time. Want you too much right now." He's disheveled, Rack's all awry from Daniel's roaming hands, and gasping for breath. "Turn 'round and hold the counter. Gonna ream you out like you've never been fucked before."

Eager hands help shove him on his way. His glasses are fogged up and he can't see; his hair is in his eyes and sweat's rolling down his skin, but Daniel so. Doesn't. Care. This golden god is about to top him off, and he'd swear that every inch of his skin's been inflamed by the fire that lives inside Rack.

His zipper gives way under the pressure, and his cock falls forward. "Go on and touch yourself," Rack orders. "I'll be there soon. Want you hard and dripping for me. Like I am for you."

Gratefully, Daniel wraps his hand around his cock and pumps. This has got to be the strangest sex of his life, but is he complaining? Oh, hell, no.

Cool air hits the curves of his ass as Rack jerks his jeans down, and he feels the cold metal of silver rings on those slender fingers as they grip and squeeze. "Oh, yeah," Rack breathes. He digs in the pocket of his shirt and pulls out a condom. "You ready for me?"

Daniel can't form words. He rolls his head on his neck and bows forward, aching for the first touch of fingers – and Rack doesn't disappoint. Slippery and slick, they slide between his cheeks and probe at his hole, already contracting in anticipation. "Hungry little bastard," Rack murmurs. "Get you that hot, do I?"

Fuck you, Daniel thinks, and fuck me already!

"Want to take more time," Rack's muttering, shoving himself in knuckles deep and twisting hard. "Need to feel you inside and out. Can't wait. Ever since you poked that gormless face out your car window I knew I had to have you, and I've waited all bloody morning for this. Too long. Should've just jumped you the second this arse walked in my door."

The fingers withdraw, and something blunt and hot, tipped with cold metal, is pressing at his entrance. The piercing sends an extra thrill through Daniel, and he gives a full-body shudder. "Like that, do you?" Rack pushes just a little, barely enough for the head of his cock to slide in. "Then you'll like this a hell of a lot better..."

His arms circle around, holding Daniel tight, as he shoves himself in with one hard, fast stroke. Daniel bucks forward with a hoarse yell, but Rack's already got fingers wrapped around his cock, lacing them with his own, and they're pumping together for all they're worth.

Rack, Daniel discovers, has the perfect rhythm. That pierced cock splits him open and those ringed hands jerk him off in such syncopation that he's being torn from one bliss to another.

"Come on for me, baby," Rack urges, his voice strained. "Let it go, cause I'm bloody well gonna explode." He squeezes, hard, then digs a nail into the dripping slit.

That's it; a dead man couldn't take that and not climax. Daniel's cock erupts, shooting thick gouts of come all over the counter, dripping down his legs. He only just registers Rack's yell of triumph before he feels the spasms rip through him as well, and the hot load of semen erupting from Rack's cock, filling the rubber deep inside him.

The aftershocks go on forever. But when it's done, Rack is leaning hard and heavy against him, hands roaming over his belly. "Fuck me," he murmurs softly. "Never did go for blokes in glasses. But I do have a taste for a dark-haired man. Not letting you go, even when this job's done, you hear?"

Daniel's panting. His brains are currently puddled on the counter, but deep inside him he hears those words and he fucked again if he doesn't get that glimmer, the one that tells him: there might be something here.

That feeling of connection.

So. Punk. Pierced. Mouthy.

Dizzily, he decides: this could be his type after all.

CHAPTER TWO

For a long moment, there is nothing – but nothing – except the sound of air rasping in and out as both men struggle to capture the breath they need. Daniel's hands, still gripping the counter, are white-knuckled as he tries not to fall down. Rack's cock is still buried in him, balls-deep, and the metal burns hot-cold against his insides. If he hadn't stopped for a condom, he'd be leaking come out his ass, the guy shot so hard.

"God," he breathes. "Rack."

Rack's lips are resting just beneath Daniel's left shoulder blade, so when he murmurs – almost reverently, and eloquently as you could expect – "Fucking hell," it buzzes and tickles and burns.

Daniel shivers. He's already felt what Rack can do with that mouth, and that just on his own lips. Feeling the vibrations of that voice muffled by his own skin is like a mild shock of electricity. What it would be like to have those lips wrapped around his own cock, to thrust into that delicious dirty-talking mouth... if he weren't standing over a puddle and dripping with his own load of come, his dick would stiffen at the thought. It tries anyway, stirring restlessly. *More. Want more.*

Small hands rub at his sides, his back. "Wore you out, then, did I?" Rack's still a little breathless himself, but smug as ever. "Tell me, love, was it good for you?"

Daniel swallows around the vast dryness in his throat. "Jesus," he croaks. "Holy fuck."

"Well, there's a new one on me." Those hands keep moving, teasing their way down to his hips. He'll have bruises from how hard they gripped him earlier, but right now it just feels good. "A god. I could deal with that."

Daniel has to laugh. Short. Blond. Mouthy. Messiah complex. Asshole. Total stranger. Best sex he's had in – ever.

"I'd say it was all down to my cock and my techniques, but there's those piercings," Rack murmurs against his back. "Gets 'em every time, they do."

Daniel shivers at the memory of the cold metal bashing inside him. "What – what was that thing?"

"Reverse PA. Dolphin. Ladder. Guiche. Few others." Rack's hands tickle him one last time. "Want to see 'em, instead of just feeling 'em?"

Rack laughs when Daniel sucks in a breath. "Yeah, real metal-head I am, both of 'em. God, you feel good." He shimmies his hips, his cock still half-stiff. "Good enough to eat, I'd wager. Have to do

that sometime. You bent over something nice and low with this delicious arse raised up in the air for me. Legs spread good and wide so I can see your pucker all ready for my mouth. Hole like yours, I'd eat you out like you were a gourmet dinner." He drags the tip of his tongue up the back of Daniel's sweat-soaked neck. "Maybe even oil you up a bit, first. Cinnamon oil. Makes the mouth tingle, and what it'll do to you, you won't forget in a hurry."

He seems to like the way Daniel's trembling. "Anyone ever do that to you, baby? Rim you so hard you screamed? Had their tongue deep inside your ass, tasting you good? Bet you're sweet like candy. Can't wait to get my mouth on you."

Daniel's cock shifts again, starting to stiffen. God, he's still trying to overcome the shakes from that last orgasm, and just listening to Rack talk has him getting ready to go again. He manages an incoherent groan.

"Not much of a talker, are you, pet?" Fingers tickle around his hipbones. "S'alright. I go on enough for two."

And then some, Daniel thinks dizzily, but doesn't say.

Rack gives a long sigh of contentment, rolling his hips once more. "Still so hot and tight and wet. Can't say I fancy letting you go."

"Then don't," Daniel says hoarsely. "Fuck me again."

"Oh, I plan on it, love." Sharp teeth nibble at his shoulder. "And again, and again. But right now, much as I hate to do this, you're a bit tall for me to keep on standing here, like." When Daniel whimpers, he laughs. "It's all right. Feel this."

He pulls out slowly, ever so slowly, and Daniel feels every ridge and bump of metal underneath the sheathing of the condom. Each steel stud scrapes over his sweet spot, and he has to bite his lips to keep from screaming. The shivers spread over his entire body, and he is so wanting more.

There's such a sensation of emptiness when Rack's completely out of him. Hands spread flat on his back. "Now," that voice from a devil's paradise murmurs, "What d'you think of that, then?"

Daniel moans softly. "Gonna do that to you," Rack whispers. "Gonna punch you full of holes and thread you with metal until you fucking jingle. And when you push that prick of yours deep up inside me, feeling those loops and beads pressing you so hard, you'll know what it's all about."

Hands slip under the edge of his shirt, stealing up to his nipples – hard, aching, sore. Clever, cruel fingers give both a sharp pinch. "Do these, too. Steel hoops for me to tug on when I ride you."

This is his body, and needles, and holes that won't ever go away that they're talking about, but just thinking – listening – has got Daniel's dick fully hard again, quivering with need. "Fuck me," he begs, not caring about sounding pitiful. "Fuck me again and you can do whatever you want."

"Gonna do that, and pierce you, too," Rack purrs. "Mmm. Always did love dark-haired men who knew what they liked. God, if I'd another condom about the place I'd do you again right now."

Daniel laughs again. Surprised, disappointed, amused somehow. "A guy like you only carries one?"

"Oi!" Rack sounds indignant. "Hope springs eternal, don't it? Besides, didn't exactly expect you for my carpenter; I was looking for some fat bastard named 'Ralph' who had a hairy ass and a beer gut. Not a treat like what got handed to me. If I'd known you were you, I'd have brought a whole fucking box full."

Daniel's jeans are around his ankles, but if he remembers right – "I've got one," he volunteers, desperate for the feel of that metal inside him again.

"Sure you do. Name me one bloke who doesn't carry a jimmy hat about in his wallet." Regretful hands pet him. "Ordinary kind won't do when you're pierced, love. Has to be a bit tougher so it don't tear, but that don't matter to me 'cause it still feels the same. Hot and tight." One finger draws down the length of his spine, down to his bared ass cheeks. "Been a while, it has."

That, Daniel has a hard time believing. A guy like this? Who doesn't have a different piece of dark-haired candy in his bed every night? Nah. No way.

He hears the wet, sucking sound of a condom being peeled off and tied into a knot. "Never thought this would be the first biological waste I'd throw away in this place," Rack says. He can almost see that cocky grin.

"Biological –"

"Piercing and tattoos, love. Needles and some blood. Got to be responsible. When you got to be." The dancing fingers turn naughty again, dipping farther around his hips and brushing up against his throbbing cock. "Don't mean there ain't other things we can't do."

Daniel's dick jumps hard at the touch. "Like that idea, do you?" Rack sounds so pleased with himself that he wants to turn around and pop the guy one. That, or kiss him silly, and rub up against him until he bursts wide open again and soaks them both. "Get the rubber out of your wallet, then. Don't put it on, though. I want that job all for myself. Just give a bloke a moment to clean up, and we'll see what we'll see."

He feels the sharp sting of a biting kiss in the center of his back. "You ever been blown by someone with a tongue stud, baby? Think you'll like it. Just you wait."

Rack backs off with one last lingering touch. Sounds like he's heading for the rear of the store. "Good job the plumbers have already been," his voice floats back. "Mind you, if I get out there and find you've moved a muscle 'cept for turning round and getting that rubber out, I'll chase you down the street, bare arse or no, hear?"

As if he would. Stumbling a little on the jeans around his ankles, Daniel turns around. The counter's cold on his bare ass. It hurts, but oh, so good. Rack wasn't kidding. That'd been the fuck of his life and then some. His mind ricochets – only briefly – back to thoughts of Alex, who'd been so gentle, always easing his way in like Daniel was made of china – when he could be coaxed to do it at all. At the time, he'd thought feeling that thick cock inside him was the best it could ever be.

Flaming Mary, he'd been wrong.

Every sense he has is on hyperaware mode. He can hear the water rushing into a sink, the pump-pump-tap of a soap dispenser, the slish-slide of Rack's hands stroking together and then a longer, smoother skidding sound as they glide over his dick and balls. Daniel pictures that, and closes his eyes. He sucks in a deep breath and thinks about rotary saws, claw hammers, turning lathes – anything to keep him from firing his load right then and there.

And – oh, yeah – God, let it still be there – he bends, groaning with pleasure at the ache in his ass, and fishes his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans. It is there, just like he remembered. What'd Rack say – hope springs eternal? In his experience, that's been true, but spring rarely ever summers.

Not this time around. He's hot as August and almost panting for the short blond punk to come back out and stick it to him again.

Finally, after way too long, so long that Daniel's moved on from thinking about shop tools and is trying to do the multiplication tables in his head, Rack saunters out of the bathroom.

Oh, fuck.

His jeans are up around his hips, but he's left zipper and button undone, and his cock's hanging out in all its glory. Glittering with new-shined metal from root to tip. Rack looks at Daniel's face, and laughs, but not cruelly. "Told you so," he said. "All of it, worth every bit. You said you wanted to see, eh? So I'm givin' you a look. Free show."

He scoots around Daniel and hoists himself easily onto the countertop, spreading his legs wide. "Go on, then," he says, voice low. "Touch me. Hold me in your hand."

Daniel swallows hard, and reaches out. It's heavy with the metal and hard as stone, each piercing bristling at him. "It's all right," Rack encourages, putting his fingers over Daniel's. "Touch 'em. See what's what."

Strangest. Sex. Ever. Still not complaining. Fascinated, Daniel runs his fingers over the thick loop at the tip of Rack's cock, running through the slit through the upper side. "What's this?"

"Reverse PA," Rack breathes. "Prince Albert done wrong way 'round, only I happen to think it's the right way. Fuck, you have good hands. Keep goin'."

Something cool and slick just under the spongy tip, dipping in and out. "Dolphin, that's called." Rack pushes forward, nudging his dick further into Daniel's touch. "Those bars – run your finger across them – god! – that's a frenum ladder, that is. And here, this is what I want especially for you..."

He takes Daniel's hand in his own again, and guides it underneath his balls. To his shock he feels metal there too, just behind the heavy sac. "Guiche," Rack grinds. "Never felt anything like it when you're riding cock. Presses that good spot on you from inside and out."

Daniel's mouth is watering. Yesterday – hell, this morning – he'd have thought this grotesque. He loves the natural beauty of a cock, swelling fat and purple under his hands. But those bits of metal are all gorgeous as fuck, and the way they felt, grating on his insides...

Clear drops start forming at the tip of Rack's dick, little pearls of salty sugar. Daniel's mouth waters. "You're clean now. Let me suck you," he whispers. "I want to taste."

Rack groans. "God, love, I'd like nothing better – except this." He nicks the nearly-forgotten foil packet out of Daniel's hand. "I've had my turn. Now it's yours."

Slithery as a snake, he slides off the counter and lands on his knees, that decorated dick glittering in the sunlight. Quick hands, clever talented hands, tear the foil open and glance it over. "Thin as lambskin, love," he breathes. "Oh, you're gonna love this."

He leans in close to inhale. "Oh, fuck, the scent of you. All musk and sweat and come. Already sopping wet for me, aren't you?" His tongue flickers out teasingly, as if he wants to taste. "I'm clean, but we'll get tested tomorrow. You and me both, honest from the start. Then we'll have no more need of this and I can suck you off proper. But for now..."

The condom glides on slick as glass, lubricated by the ribbons of pre-come dribbling out the tip of Daniel's cock. He groans, throwing his head back, at the feel of those fingers on him. Rack looks up from under those eyelashes, those pierced eyebrows, and gives him Satan's favorite smile. "Best grab onto something, pet," he murmurs, "and I vote for it bein' me. 'Cause you're about to go for the ride of your life, you are."

Rack's not wrong. That mouth, that hard bead of metal through his tongue, flicks rough and fast against the fat, blood-dark head of Daniel's dick until it's almost in time with his heartbeat. Daniel's gasping already, and so glad Rack gave him permission to hold on. The blond's going to have matching fingerprints on his shoulders before they're done here.

But the very sight of him, that blond head buried between his legs, sucking like a Hoover and sliding... slowly... down... further and further, cheeks bulging with the fatness and weight of his dick... until he feels himself hit soft, fluttery skin. Deep-throated. Oh, God. No one's ever – not ever –

Rack's cock is dripping now, heavy wet drops of come that splatter lightly on the linoleum. He reaches down and starts fisting himself, heedless of all that metal. Pulling roughly at the PA, bucking his own head back with a mighty groan. His hand looks desperate as it tugs his swollen skin. He's ready to pop, and it's gonna be like a cannon when he goes off.

Daniel's fighting for breath again. Is he ever going to be able to breathe, to speak, to form a sentence when this man's fucking him? He doubts it. He hopes not. The way that feels - he moans, digging his fingers deeper into Rack's shoulders and thrusting forward.

At the incoherent sound Rack laughs down in his chest, the vibrations thrilling through every inch of Daniel's over-stimulated body. Then he swallows. Hard. Once, twice, again –

Daniel yells, bucking forward. Fingers curl on his naked thighs as Rack swallows once more, throat

muscles squeezing him tight and tongue working hard on the long vein in the underside of his cock. *Come on, baby*, he seems to be saying. *You know you want to. Let go for me. Come for me, pet...*

He's so close. God, he's almost there – just a little more –

Then teeth scrape lightly, ever so lightly, over the skin of his dick, and waves of pleasure pain blast through him like lightning. He's screaming something he doesn't understand, his hips are churning and God he hopes he's not choking Rack except that now he's coming, coming so hard he can't make himself stop and that hungry mouth is slaverling all over his length, sucking and lapping as if to drink every drop that the condom's caught. Rack weighs the heavy balance of the reservoir tip on his tongue, gives a mighty shudder, and Daniel can just look down and see the gouts of sperm shooting from that pierced cock, splattering on the mostly-clean floor in thick puddles.

Oh... fuck.

His legs give out. And Rack's either stronger than he looks, or just really quick, because he catches Daniel on the way down and pulls him about so that they're nestled against each other, Daniel's head on Rack's chest, listening to the gunfire-fast pounding of his heartbeat.

They don't say anything for a long few minutes. Can't. Too much sensation, too many feelings, even aftershocks that ripple through them and leave them shocky.

Finally Daniel swallows hard. So not what he expected from a day on the job. So can't say he's sorry. He's feeling it again, that connection, that special sense that beyond the unbelievable sex and despite the fact that they've got absolutely nothing else in common, this is a guy he could see himself with for a long, long time.

"Not giving me up?" he rasps. "The hell with that. I'm not giving you up."

Rack tilts his head back and laughs – wearily, but wholeheartedly. "Couldn't nothin' tear me away from you, love," he says frankly. "Man like you comes along once, maybe twice in a lifetime." He taps Daniel in the middle of the chest. "Can feel it, right here. You too?"

And Daniel's startled, because again, so hadn't expected that. "You – I thought a guy like you –"

"What, thought you'd have to fight a fleet of cocks and asses all lined up and waiting for me?" A tired giggle. "Hell, no, love. I'm enough to drive a sane man mad, and after five or ten minutes I've either pissed a bloke off, he's made me crazy, or I've sussed out he might just be one of the good ones. Lasted a whole morning with you. Liking you better minute by minute. Lot of pride in there, lot of toughness, but soft as a marshmallow, too, in some places."

He nudges Daniel. "Hell of a pushover when it comes to a nooner, too."

"Hey!" Daniel shoves back. "I don't do that for just anyone."

Rack nods. "Can tell, I can. You're near tight as a virgin." His eyes close in bliss. "God! Best not be thinking like that again, 'cause we're all out of latex and I'll be hard for you a third time, you wait and see."

"Rack..." Daniel's coming down now. He runs his hand nervously along the line of that lean leg, down the skin and denim. "You'd better mean that, okay? I did. I don't do one-night stands if I can help it. I do long-term."

"You want long term?" Rack cocks an eyebrow. "Still on that 'must be the special prize at the gay pride parade' kick, love? Long term, I'm good at long term. Last lover I had, name of Lucas, he lasted six years. Would be with him still, if he hadn't tossed me over for a bit of redheaded pussy called Dana that made him 'think twice about his sexuality'," he mocks. "Bleedin' tosser. What we had was special."

One finger tweaks Daniel's nose. "And don't go thinkin' we're too different to make a go of this, whatever it is. Ain't no one in the world quite like me, love. Fuckin' broke the mold and all that shit. You can put up with me, and me – I suspect I can take a quiet, gentle, hard-working, strong-handed, sweet-faced, thick-cocked morsel like you on."

Daniel shuts his eyes. A smile tugs at the corner of his lips. "And you know, only you would put it that way," he says after a minute.

"So?" Rack butts the top of his head with his chin. "You in this, or not?"

And maybe it's crazy, but – "I'm in." Daniel draws doodles down the length of Rack's thigh. "I'm so in."

"Gonna do everything like we talked about?" Rack purrs. "Gonna let me fill you with holes and metal? Maybe even ink you up a bit?"

"Depends." Daniel nuzzles him. "I mean, I'm new to all this piercing stuff, but if I let you punch my cock full of holes, doesn't that mean no sex until it heals? I'm so not giving that up for weeks."

"Mmm. Point, love. You scar easy? Diabetic? Anything else like that?"

"Nope and nope."

"Should heal fine, then, but you're right... and hell if I'm passing up a chance to fuck you silly every chance I get." Rack drums his fingers on Daniel's arms. "Got it!"

Daniel raises an eyebrow. "Should I be scared or excited?"

Rack's eyes glitter at him with a deep, dark amusement. "Oh, be excited, Dan. Be very excited."

* * *

They end up going to a place called "Inkshout!" over Daniel's protests. He'd much rather get his first piercings done in Rack's shop, but there's no convincing Rack of that. "Isn't ready yet," the blond explained shortly, doing up his pants. "Health codes. Gotta get the place inspected first before I'm legal to punch in there. There's a place few blocks away, decent enough as they go. Work there sometimes freelance when I feel like it." One hand caresses his cheek. "Yeah, I'd rather it be here,

too, baby. But I can't be waiting that long to see you with some steel dangling from that hot, tight little body of yours. Okay?"

And Daniel gave in. He suspects he'll be doing a lot of that with Rack. Who was so jazzed he only smoked six cigarettes on the eight-block walk there, with the warning – "I get my vice here, and you choose a vice of your own. No bitching about one or the other. Fair?"

But he's even starting to like the smell, and the way it tastes when Rack grabs him for a kiss, grinding him hard against the wall of an alley, to hell with broad daylight and anyone who wants to being able to see.

He'll have to think of some kind of vice, just to piss Rack off. Rack'll probably, secretly, get a kick out of it.

"Inkshout!" isn't what Daniel expected at all. Yeah, he's seen how classy Rack's place is going to look, but he guesses in the back of his mind he still had the image of tattoo parlors as dirty-floored, one room-storefronts with an old duct-taped chair and a foot-powered needle.

Instead, it looks more like a... well, there's pictures all over the walls ("Called 'flash', they are," Rack murmurs to him), and a sound like dentist drills. From here and there he catches glimpses into sanitary white rooms, gleaming clean and looking more like a clinic than a tattoo gallery ("Ink parlor," Rack mutters.)

Rack said he worked there when he felt like it. He hadn't said he was the star of the show. A shout of "Rack!" goes up from the waiting and the waiting-on when he pushes the door open, all blow and braggadocio.

"You said he wasn't working tonight!" a wisp of a girl accuses. "I told you I wanted Rack and you said –"

"Yeah, everyone wants a piece of me, but I'm taken." Rack puts an arm around Daniel's waist and jerks him close. "My honey. Every bloody eye off him, and any hand that even thinks of touching him loses it, get me?"

"Rack, honey, chill," a plump Goth behind the counter chides. "He's got too many parts for me anyway."

"Nah, you, Althea, you're alright. Gonna pierce lover here, if the room's open. Yeah?"

She flips through a cloth-covered ledger. "You got lucky, hon. Open for the next thirty. Any way we could get you to do a couple quick inks while you're here?"

Rack frowns darkly, but Daniel squeezes one hand. "Can I watch?" he whispers. "I might get some ideas."

Only he feels the shudder run through his new partner at his words. "One or two," Rack snaps. "Quick ones. Then I'm getting my Dan home where I want him and me both, understand?"

Althea raises her hands. "Room's all yours, then, sugar. Choose your needles and your gauge and I'll mind my own business."

"Probably going to have me doing some Celtic bullshit that'll take hours," Rack grumbles, already bent over a glass-topped case. He tugs at Daniel. "C'mere, then, have a look at what's what. Titanium. With beads. Nice and thick, not too big though, I don't think. Yeah?"

Daniel examines them. His chest prickles. "I could go for that."

"We're in." Rack raps the counter and barks out a series of instructions and requests that make absolutely no sense to Daniel. Althea seems highly amused, though, and she pulls out whatever it is that he's requested, passing it over with a wink and a nod.

"Tick tock, Rack. And you're down for a butterfly on a shoulder blade and a Taz on a calf."

"Bloody fucking Taz," Rack groans. "God, Daniel. Best not get any ideas from that lot."

"Nah." Daniel bends down to nip Rack's ear. "You'll give me better ones."

Rack shudders again. "Anyone ever tell you your voice is pure sex? No? Then they're daft, is all I've got to say." He grabs Daniel by the hand and drags him off to the side, to a room with a door instead of a curtain. "Into my parlor, and move that well-shaped ass. Can't wait much longer."

"No sex in there!" Althea shouts. They ignore her.

No sex, huh? Daniel gets that, he guesses, though it's gonna be hard. It already *is* hard, rubbing against his zipper, and from Rack's grin he knows the man can tell.

He pushes Daniel against the door for another one of those soul-seeking kisses, rubbing gently against him, bulge to bulge. "Sorry, pet, but she means it," he says softly. "Althea owns this place. Nice enough if you treat her nice, but a right bitch if you cross her. One groan that don't sound like 'ow' and she'll be in here with a staple gun."

Daniel winces. "Okay, negative image nicely reinforced."

"So..." Rack draws a finger down his chest... "Let's get on with this." He points at a bed, the kind clinics have, with the sterile paper wrapping pulled down over it and everything. "Get yourself up there and have your shirt off, pet. Let me see that chest."

He busies himself with washing his hands again, and snapping on a pair of rubber gloves; unwrapping and peeling things out of various containers. When he turns back to Daniel, nervously propped up on the table, he's got the look of both a mad scientist and a sex fiend.

Daniel bursts out laughing.

Rack approaches, slow and stealthy. "Oh, I wouldn't be giggling, love. When I do things, I do them right." Rubber fingers stroke over his chest. "You ready, then?"

Daniel blinks. "You don't have to -?"

"Bit of this here, bit of that there, but I've a good eye." Rack's dabbing rubbing alcohol over both his nipples. "Don't need a marker like most do. I get it right the first time."

He produces a needle and a cork, and Daniel gapes at them. "What?" Rack looks puzzled. "Got both your ears done, haven't you – oh, forgot. Bloody malls. Amateurs. Used a punch gun, didn't they? That's bollocks. You want a real piercing, you have a needle, and it goes in just like this..."

Daniel sucks in a sharp breath, but as soon as he feels it the sting's gone, fading into a slow burn. Rack slides a loop of metal through his nipple and clicks it shut with a bead. His eyes widen just a little. "God," he whispers. "Other one now. Better be ready."

He is, and the sting's even less now that he's expecting it. And when he looks down, both his nipples are pierced, a heavy weight dangling where he never expected one to be. The light tug shoots straight down his stomach to his cock, already pulsing with excitement.

"Now." Rack licks his lips. His eyes are dilated as he lays the cork and needle aside. "Jeans down, pet. Time for the guiche."

"Will it hurt?"

"Like hell. But I'll kiss it better. Then I'll take you home and fuck you six ways to Sunday till you're feeling no pain at all."

Oh. Oh, God. "Deal," Daniel says hoarsely.

"Raise your legs for me, love." Rack shivers when he does and his cock's on view, flat against his stomach and sticking to it with drops of semen. "Wide, now, wide apart."

A fresh pair of gloves, and the rubber-cool hands are probing at the little strip of skin behind his balls. "You ever been fisted, Dan?" Rack murmurs, dabbing on the alcohol.

Daniel sucks in his breath. "No."

"Gonna do that to you too." There's a clamp of some kind, and it hurts a little, but he's hypnotized by Rack's voice. "Start you off easy. Just one finger. Then two, and three, and four, till I've got my whole hand in you and I'm twisting deep. Gonna make you writhe. Make you scream."

"You do that already," Daniel gasps.

"And I'm gonna keep on doin' it for a while to come," Rack promises. Daniel can't quite see what's glittering in his hand. "Gonna fuck you... fill you up... milk you dry... suck your cock and teach you everything there is to know about pleasure and pain and –"

The needle goes in. Daniel arches his back off the bed, mouth open in a silent scream. Not because of the pain, but because as he pushes the needle and the ring through, Rack slips two fingers up his ass and presses down hard on the sweet spot.

He can't help it. He comes, hard and messy and fast, splattering his chest. Rack's breathing heavy as he clicks the bead in place, his eyes wide and dark. "See what I mean?" he murmurs as Daniel pants. "Get your kit back on, love. Fuck the butterfly and the Taz, we're off for home."

He helps Daniel up, and kisses him a third time, drinking him in like there's no tomorrow. "Way I figure it, you owe me one now. You feel like paying up?"

And Daniel, weighed down with metal, heart somewhere way up in the stratosphere, kisses Rack back with all the depth of his new-gotten knowledge, feeling that bizarre connection strengthen. "Looking forward to it," he whispers, voice dark.

He touches his lover, just because he can. Short. Blond. Punk. Mouthy. Asshole. Smoker. Sex god.

His.

CHAPTER THREE

They're out of "Inkshout!" and back onto the street, both men feeling just a little bit like they're high on something really good. Rack's moving like he's got steel springs in his feet, wired as hell and not caring one bit what anyone thinks about him. Daniel's only ever seen junkies full of smack and crazy people walk that way, like they've got way, way too much energy inside them to just take one step after the other.

Funny thing is, he's not wary of it. He's a little light-headed from the needles and from coming so hard once again, but he's not scared.

Rack hasn't taken a hit of anything but adrenaline all day long, and now he's a little overloaded. And okay, he could be a little bit crazy, but that's just his way. It's cool.

Daniel shuts his eyes against the sunlight, laughing inside. Some kind of life, eh? Start off the day as this boring Joe who's looking for love in all the wrong places; finish it off on the arm of a new partner who's punk and pierced and brash and so totally wrong for him that he is abso-fucking-lutely perfect.

Rack's digging around in his pockets, hunting for his lighter. He can't stop bouncing just a little on the balls of his feet. When he finds it, he waves it at Daniel with a wolfish grin. "You ever start this up, I'll never bugger you again, got it? Rotten habit."

Daniel had never thought of it. But now he's tempted. "Not even if I ask nicely?"

"Oh, now he gets a mouth on him, does he? Like he hadn't already." Rack gives a little moan and pushes his hips forward, deliberately, to see if he can make Daniel blush. It works, he enjoys it, and he knows that Daniel does too.

Glancing back at Inkshout!, he lets out a little whoop. "Gonna find out later on what that mouth can do," he says, softly enough that the hairs raise on the back of Daniel's neck. "Lots of places for it to play."

Daniel touches his chest lightly, feeling the low burn of the piercings where they brush against his shirt. He aches between his legs and the metal there is the strangest damn feeling, but already it's nudging at him in that really good way and he thinks he likes it.

"I did good, huh?" Daniel asks, more to see Rack roll his head on his neck and almost purr than for reassurance.

Racks shivers as he places a cigarette between his lips. "Brilliant, pet. That," he breathes, clicking

his lighter, "was just fucking brilliant! You know how proud I am of you? Mmm, God, the way you shivered and came when the needle touched your skin..." He closes his eyes in bliss and sucks in a deep lungful of smoke, lips pursed around the white cylinder like it's a cock.

He wavers for a moment, lost in whatever Technicolor dreams populate his head, before looking back around him, down the street, up it, and back at Daniel. "How d'they feel, love?" he asks softly. "That soft burn, like I've just bitten your tits good and hard. Such a good pain betwixt your thighs, as if you're a woman and I've just fucked holy hell out of you."

"Rack, God," Daniel breathes. His cock is already trained to the sound of its master's voice, and it's twitching. There's no way he can walk back to his car with this new piercing – shit, he actually got pierced! – and a hard-on. "You're gonna kill me here."

"Don't you worry about that. Gonna have you die a thousand little deaths before I'm done with you." Rack's eyes are dark. Rack reaches up to skim his hand across Daniel's face, thumb over cheekbone. Something crackles in him, almost audible, and he pulls back with a jerk. "Right, that's it. You good for walking? Follow me, then."

Then Rack takes off, still with that steel-spring bounce, dragging Daniel after him by the hand. "Come on, then, keep up!"

But he's going in the wrong direction – away from his own studio, from Daniel's car. He's got so much muscle and strength in those wiry arms that Daniel has to dig in his heels to pull him back. "Hey, wait a second. Rack, stop, you –"

Heaving the sigh of a drama queen, Rack whirls back around into Daniel, startling him into catching the smaller man and putting his arms about him. "You're tryin' my patience, here," he says. "Lucky thing you've got me wrapped 'round your little finger. What's the problem?"

Daniel can't help but smile down at those wicked, dancing eyes, full of devil-mischief and genuine caring. "Just tell me where we're going?"

Rack looks surprised. "Clinic! There's one just down the way, been there before a time or two when I needed a tetanus jab or a bit of a stitch. Know me there, they do."

"Clinic?"

"For testing, you great ninny." The slim artist's hands rove over Daniel's chest, just below the piercings. He hisses at the burn and the feel of being touched that way. "Sensitive, eh? You'll not believe it, once they've healed up and they're strong enough to give a tug at, for me to take in my teeth and pull... but yeah, tests. Sooner begun, sooner done, yeah? Condoms are good an' all, but I want us both with nice little pieces of paper to green light a good bareback ride. Want you to see what all this metal feels like raw. Want to feel you, smooth and slick inside me," he purrs. "So yeah, clinic. Now. Got any problems with that?"

Daniel's cock is pulsing now, pressing against his thigh. "You talk such a pretty game," he murmurs, touching Rack in return. He moves his own hands to Rack's chest and roams until he finds – ah! – two chunky rings. Gives them a harsh tug, not hard enough to hurt, but enough that he

knows Rack feels it good.

Rack gasps, shuddering and throwing his head back. "God almighty! Knew your hands... do that again!"

"Uh-uh, not on the street." Daniel tweaks Rack's nipple rings just lightly, tenderly, before sliding his hands down to his hips. "Maybe later."

He can tell Rack approves. The wicked little smirk is a giveaway. "Where'd you learn to tease like that, then? And why me?"

"Because." Daniel pushes their groins together, letting Rack feel what's what. He's not surprised to feel that the other man is hard too. "I could come just from listening to you," he says huskily. "The way you talk to me is almost better than sex. I just wanted you to feel a little payback, that's all."

"Wicked, wicked." Rack backs away slowly, deeply approving. "Oh, yeah. We're gettin' to that clinic now, you hear? And then we're off for home."

And Daniel doesn't both to ask *yours?* or *mine?* because he already knows – he's staying over at Rack's that night, come hell or high water. This crazy, pierced punk has already gotten under his skin, way under, and he wants to play.

Somehow, he thinks Rack'll be up for that.

* * *

The testing goes off smoothly, for the most part. It's nothing Daniel hasn't done before. He's always been especially careful to get the blood work done before and after ending a relationship – particularly when ending. Because you never know. You know? He's been cheated on.

The day Rack cheats on him is the day the sky turns green. He just knows. It helps to confirm that when they walk in together and he strides up to the counter, smacks his hand down, and says both very loudly and cheerfully: "Bring on your needles, doves, got some testing that needs doing here!"

And okay, yeah, at first Daniel thinks he's going to die of embarrassment, but then this one nurse with curling blond hair and laughing eyes looks up from her charts, already cracking up, and grins at Rack like he's a long-lost friend. "Are you sure?" she asks. "Rack, he looks like he's about to cut and run."

"Not this one." Rack's arm tightens around Daniel's waist, his hand slipping into one back pocket. "Found a keeper, I have. Just want a bit of testing to make sure everything's as it should be. So you birds gonna check us in or what?"

Daniel hides his red face in Rack's hair. It smells of gel and, beneath that, herbal shampoo. Spicy. Pungent. Good.

The nurse waves her hand at the others gathering around, some just wanting to say hello, some curious as all hell about this flamboyant little bird of paradise. "I'll do the sticks." When there's

laughter and a little jokey pushing, she puts her hands on her hips and mock-scolds: "Hey, I called it! I'm the one who gets to touch him today!"

"Not that I don't feel the love for all you ladies." Rack blows them a kiss, and Daniel has to stifle a laugh.

The nurse pats the shoulder of a small, shiny-haired girl in a red-striped uniform. "Susie? Go pull Rack's chart and make up a new for this one, Mr...?"

"Browning. Dan – Daniel Browning."

She smiles at him, warm as a mother, and touches a finger to her nametag. "I'm Elizabeth. Charge nurse on the afternoon shift. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Here now, no flirting," Rack warns. He tugs Daniel a little harder against him. "Mine."

She raises her hands. "Yours, all yours! And about time, too."

"Only reason I let you talk to me like that is because I love you, pet."

"No, because you know that in here, I have the power of the needle." Elizabeth winks. "Okay, Mr. Browning – Daniel? – first, you get to fill out paperwork."

Daniel sighs. Paperwork. It's always paperwork, whether you're putting in a cabinet or getting tested for a whirlwind romance.

"Poor old sod," Rack murmurs, stroking his ass through his jeans. "I'll hold your hand."

Under his breath, he adds, "Then later on, I'll hold something else, won't I?"

Elizabeth hears – he can see her struggling to keep a straight face – and Daniel gives up. "Mouthy little punk," he murmurs gently, because he can't say it angrily.

"Thought you liked that." Rack waggles his tongue at him.

And Daniel has to give, because it's either laugh or scream in frustration that they're not somewhere private, and he does like that about Rack – he really, really does.

* * *

The sun's going down when they leave the clinic, sporting band-aids and both feeling irritated that they'll have to wait a few days for the results. Even though they already knew that, they're both impatient. Yeah, yeah, it's the right thing to do – it's stupid not to do it – but the more Daniel gets to know Rack, the more he trusts him. Deep down, he's sure they're both clean. Pure for each other.

But the medical establishment says wait, so they will. Well - mostly.

"Doesn't matter," Rack says to him, soft and low, as they exit. "Gonna take you back to my place

and strip you down, every single stitch you've got on, and just look at you for the longest time, 'til you're leaking for want of me. Then I'll touch your cock with my bare fingers, just to feel how slick you are, while I'm rolling that damned condom on. And I'm putting my mouth on you again, to smell you, taste what I can of you. I'll swallow you down and push my fingers deep inside while I'm doin' it. Just you wait and see."

Daniel has to take a deep breath and hold it to calm down. "Want to taste you, too," is all he can whisper. He's not good with words that have to be spoken out loud. But it's driving him crazy, knowing it'll be a few days before he gets to wrap his mouth around Rack's bare cock. Taste his pre-come, swirling his (you change who he is) tongue around and around that piercing and underneath the foreskin until it pulls back and he orgasms, coming in a heavy salty mouthful that he's almost salivating for.

God, Rack's infecting the way he thinks, now. And he's hard again. Again. He softened in the clinic, when they weren't touching and there were things like rubber tourniquets and tubes of his blood being drawn. But now that they're on the street one more time, and Rack's hand seems to have found a permanent new home in Daniel's back pocket, rubbing and squeezing and cupping him, he is *hard*.

He's walking slower now. Not so much of that steel-spring bounce, and more of a panther's slink, each step rolling his hips. Daniel has to adjust himself in his jeans as he watches his new lover move, sees that matching bulge Rack's sporting, the one he means for Daniel to be watching. Every now and then he scrapes his nails against Daniel's ass, and murmurs something else dirty and exciting. Things he's going to do, when they get back home.

If he comes through on even half his promises, Daniel's going to die tonight.

But he'll go out a happy, happy man.

* * *

Back to Rack's studio they do go, that hand still burning through his jeans onto his ass, a plastic pharmacy bag swinging from the pierced punk's other arm.

"Don't have any more condoms to home," Rack had said right in front of the swinging doors, mothers and fathers and impressionable teenage ears everywhere around them. Daniel didn't care, because then Rack had turned about and tugged Daniel to him by the waistband, close enough to grind hard against hard.

"Besides," Rack had murmured, "Reckon you need to know what's what about these things. Could be after a long, hard day of working those muscles puttin' up great heavy things, you'll have a mind to come home to a nice, long heavy thing, and you need to be knowing what'll work."

"Even after the tests come back, and I can suck you bare?" Daniel whispered.

God, Rack shivered so prettily. And he pouted even prettier. "Could be, pet," he said, with his lip sticking out ever so slightly. "I'm an ink slinger and a puncher. Might be I get stuck by a needle, and need these ruddy tests all over again. Won't be puttin' you to any danger, hear?"

His grin turned wicked again. "But I'm planning to have you so addicted to me, cock and balls and ass –"

Daniel kissed him, hard, because it was Rack and that made it OK, rough mouth to eager one. "You think that hasn't already happened?"

Rack had licked his lips. "It better have – and you won't be waiting any three days for tests to come back. So maybe you'll just swing by here and pick up a box of these, for us to have a little fun in the meanwhile."

More like a lot of fun. Daniel had gone along with the lesson, no complaints. Rack had found what he wanted in a condom and bought the big pack, the "I'm either overconfident or one seriously lucky sonofabitch" size. He had bitched about the lack of flavors and scents of lube in the sexual accessories section, but in the end they managed to find a "big enough" tube of cherry. "Even though I already popped yours, I'm planning on doin' other things for the first time tonight." He swiped his thumb over Daniel's lower lip. "Many a thing. This is appropriate, you think?"

Daniel had only just escaped squeaking like a mouse, or a small child.

As they walked, Rack swung the bag every so often, shake-shake-shake, giving him the devil's own eye. Murmuring things like "split you open and make you scream for me", "suck you till all the blood in your body's run to your dick and you're near to bursting", and "taste your sweet arse, luv, all slick and scented with this cherry I've got here; fuck you with my tongue. Lap, lap, lap, just like a kitten, till you're fluttering open for me to push my way inside and eat you out".

Dry-mouthed, hoarse, he'd reminded Rack they couldn't do that – not yet, not till the tests came back, even though he could almost already feel the probing wetness seeking its way up his hole.

Rack winked at him. "Can do anything you like with a little piece of saran wrap and some creativity," he murmured. "I've no end of ideas for your sweet little rosebud. You'll see."

Daniel swallowed.

And now that they're here, at the studio, Daniel hardly gives his car a second glance as Rack pulls at him with eager hands, yanking him inside. "Couple hours away from that cock is a couple hours too long," he breathes, kicking the door shut and twisting the deadbolt.

Impatiently, Rack fumbles for keys inside his jeans pocket, finally coming up with one to unlock an innocent-looking little door behind what'll be the check-in counter. "I live up above. Come on, then, shift yourself!" He scoots Daniel in front of him, slapping Daniel's ass for good measure and butting his head into the small of Daniel's back when Daniel's a couple steps up.

Eager, is he? That's okay. Daniel's been thinking for the past few minutes, listening to Mister Orgasm Mouth, and he's got a plan of his own. He lets himself be chivvied up the narrow stairs, and waits at the top. Tense as a tiger. Just waiting.

Rack bounds up the last few steps, right into arm's reach, and Daniel – pounces!

Whooping with laughter, he whirls Rack around and hard into the wall, pinning those slender arms above his head with one hand. He's strong from all his lifting and building, and he's got the element of surprise on his side. And after one startled yelp from Rack, the punk knows he's not going to hurt, except in the best way ever.

Rack's tongue curls behind his teeth. "Feeling frisky, pet?"

"Frisky?" Daniel bends and crushes his mouth to Rack's, seeking out every single corner of that smoky-flavored cavern with his heated tongue, chasing Rack's own tongue and fighting it hard. He pulls back, mouth swollen. "You've spent hours now, teasing me like I'm made of stone."

Rack undulates his hips against Daniel's. "Feels like you are, pet," he croons. "Gonna show me just how hard?"

"Uh-uh. First I'm gonna do to you every. Damn. Thing. That you said you would do to me." Daniel slams mouth against mouth with him again, all too briefly, and bites at Rack's lip before pulling away. "Everything."

And Rack, arms still held high, shimmies a second time. "Get on with it, then, love. Don't make a poor bastard wait."

"Oh, believe me. I don't intend to."

He begins a long, slow slide down Rack's body. "Keep your arms raised," he warns. "Just like I've got you tied there. Roped to some hooks on the wall."

"Baby, there are hooks on the wall," Rack purrs. "And there is rope."

"But you're not moving, are you?" Daniel's halfway to his knees now, stopping to toy with the heavy loops of metal through Rack's own nipples. "Tell me you're not moving for me. Say it."

"I promise," Rack breathes. His chest gives a double hitch. "Do that again. Harder. More."

Daniel twists the loops to the right, and Rack gives an almighty groan. Daniel can see his dick jump violently in his pants, tight as they are. "More," he begs. "Please, love, please..."

He twists them again, then drags down hard and rotates the loops through that sensitive skin. "How would you like me to bite these?" he whispers. "Suck one into my mouth and thread my tongue through it?"

Rack thrashes against the wall, his arms quivering. His voice is raspy: "Like it? I'd fucking well love it and you know it, you ungodly cocktease –"

"Cocktease? I'm the cocktease?" Daniel gives the nipple loops one last tug and slips to his knees, dragging his fingernails down Rack's belly and over his zipper. "What do you say I stop teasing, then?"

"I'd say bloody fucking yes, is what I'd say – oh, God, fuck, Daniel, hell!" Rack bucks and snarls,

because without any gentle touches or warnings Daniel jerks his zipper down and lets that metal-heavy, blood-hot, swollen cock fall out into his hands. It's soaking at the tip, and there's a damp spot gleaming on his stomach from where it rested.

"Want me?" he whispers, close enough that Rack can feel his breath on his dick. "You want me to touch you? Suck you?"

"You been taking lessons from me, and you learn too damn fast," Rack pants. "Rubbers are by my foot, Daniel. For the love of God, hurry or I'll come on your face."

"Nuh-uh." Daniel pinches the base of Rack's cock hard, savoring the fierce buck and jump. He knows that hurts. How good that hurts. "You're not coming just yet."

Rack groans, but he manages to keep his arms up. He's grabbed onto something – Daniel can't tell what – and the tendons in his arms are straining. "That's good," Daniel whispers, loving the rush of power. No wonder Rack loves verbal sex. "You stay just like that. Promise me?"

A nod is all Rack's capable of. Good enough.

Carefully, with the hand that's pinching him down, Daniel lays that fat cock to rest in his palm. And he does what he's been wanting to do all day, been dreaming of for hours now. It's playtime.

He stares at all that metal punched through the so-sensitive skin, such a dark purple with blood that he can see it even in the dark. Moonlight through the windows glints off the piercings, each one a little silver glitter in the dark. He's curious. "Prince Albert," he says softly, tugging at it. "Can I spin this like I did the ones in your nipples?" It moves, not as freely, but a little, and from the way Rack shrieks he can tell that feels pretty damned good.

He slips his hand back behind Rack's balls, giving them a squeeze on his way through, rolling them roughly against each other. God, he already loves the noises Rack makes when he's – almost – out of control. And to think he got him this way... "Guiche," he muses, tugging down and then pushing up. "That feel good?"

"God – good – God –" Rack gasps. "More!"

"Not when I've got so much else to check out." Daniel lets his fingers tease just a little further back, then glides them back up past heavy, drawn-up sac and to Rack's cock. He prods the underside, and lifts gently. "See why they call it a dolphin," he says thoughtfully. "Looks like it's diving through your skin. What's that feel like, when you're fucking?"

"Very – damned – good –"

"I bet." He breathes against it, warm and moist. "And then you've got all of these..."

He runs his finger along the row of ball-tipped studs running the length of Rack's dick, heavy down one side and then the other. "Bet I can twist these." And he can. One... by one... by one... while Rack thrashes, curses in Cockney phrases that there's no way he can understand, and almost pulls whatever-it-is off the wall.

Rack's foreskin is pulled back hard, spongy purple tip dripping thick strings of pre-come down Daniel's hand. "Slick," he whispers. "Three days, and I get to taste."

Rack groans, and it's almost piteous. Oh, yeah. "You ready?" Daniel whispers. "Want to be in my mouth now?"

Another groan. Not letting go of his hard grip on that cock, Daniel reaches down and somehow manages to fumble out one of the condoms. He uses his teeth to tear open the packet, and fits the head over prick and PA. Slow, slow, slow, he rolls it down the length and smooths it.

"Ready?" he whispers, one more time.

Frantic nod of the head.

"Want you." Daniel nuzzles him. "Need you. How'd you do that to me, in just one day?" He presses his lips to the tip. "Doesn't matter. Just the way it is." And ever so slowly, careful of the metal and his teeth, he slides his mouth over Rack's cock, sucking down hard.

He's never been able to deep-throat, and Rack's too big. But damned if he doesn't get almost all the way, stroking with quick flicks of his tongue at the underside, the dolphin, everything. His free hand grips Rack by the hip, and holds on tight.

And he lets go of his pinching hold.

Rack looses an almighty howl, bucking forward and pushing himself in. No time for slowly fucking his mouth, for thrusting past his lips – just one mighty pump of the hips and he can feel the punk's whole body shudder and spasm *hardhardhard* as Rack comes like a hammer slamming into concrete.

It goes on forever, shakes and shocks rocking his body. But at last, his cock slips out and his hands, boneless now, let go of what they'd been holding onto. Rack collapses over Daniel, who arches his back to bear the weight of that slender form. Daniel's shaking too, his own forgotten cock aching, but he knows he'll get paid back in full for his dominance game soon enough.

Rack can't say anything, only pant, for long minutes as he struggles to get his breath back. Daniel strokes his back in steady, soothing sweeps as he comes down from that Mount Everest high. Finally, he dares to say, his voice heavy with laughter: "Was it good for you, too?"

Rack's fist weakly thumps him across the back, and Daniel lets that laughter spill out. "I'm not all vanilla, you know."

"Too right," Rack gasps. He drags himself back up and drops to his knees, seizes Daniel by the shoulders and pulls their faces together for a ravenous kiss. "After a trick like that, I ought to turn you over my knee."

"Is that a promise?"

"Oh, love." Rack's eyelids lower, and Daniel can really, really tell he's in for it once the man's got his muscles working together again. And he is really, really looking forward to that. "Love... you have no idea."

"I think I might."

Those eyes flash dark stars at him. "Then," he purrs, leaning forward to thumb down Daniel's own zipper, "Let the games begin..."

CHAPTER FOUR

Daniel's leaned back in a vinyl leather chair that, while it feels better than many a La-Z-Boy he's ever tried, has the power to fill him with a quiet sort of dread. His hands are white-knuckled on the armrests, and he shifts his legs uneasily, trying to find a position he can hold still in.

"Stop your bloody fidgeting," Rack raps out. Even with his back turned, Daniel can tell. He's doing... something... with tiny cups of black, red, blue and green inks, lining them up into neat rows. That's not what worries Daniel. What's getting to him is the machine lying beside them on a sterile paper towel. It looks like a cross between a dentist's drill and a soldering iron, and there's a wicked-looking, sharp little needle at one end.

He's getting his first ink today. Now that his guiche and nipple piercings have all healed up (and God, haven't they had fun with those!), Rack thinks it's time to move on.

One night not long ago, lying in bed after fucking each other blind and stupid, he'd fondled the end of Daniel's spent, sticky cock, then brought his dampened fingers to his lips to suck clean. "Want you with a PA," he said wistfully. "Want it so bad. But I'm not giving up this excellent prick for healing time."

Daniel pouted a little, because after playing with Rack's piercings so much, he can almost see that shiny hoop of metal decorating the tip of his dick. He ached when he thought of having it done. "We could figure out some way..."

"Nah, not yet." Rack licked his thumb. "Got another idea, though..." He nibbled that thumb, then whirled on Daniel, throwing himself across the broader chest. His fingers dabbled whorls and designs in the soft hairs there. "Time for you to have a bit of other decoration, I think."

"You mean..."

"Oh, yeah." Rack sketched a design between Daniel's nipples, linking them together. "You need some ink, love. Something that'll show through those tight wifebeater shirts you wear while you're working. Something that'll just scream 'come and fuck me', so I can laugh at the sorry bastards you turn down because you're mine, understand it? All mine."

He'd breathed a hot swath down Daniel's neck, ending up at a nipple and tugging one silver ring taut with his teeth. "Gonna mark you with my own hands," he purred. "Turn you into my canvas. And once it's healed I'm gonna trace every line with my tongue 'til you're writhing. Come on your inked skin and rub it in, 'til you're marked with my very scent so deep no bath will ever wash you clean." He bit the nipple and worried at it. "Can I, then? Can I ink you up, love?"

Daniel pushed his hands through Rack's hair, bucking up at the pleasurepain of the silver burning his chest. "Anything you want," he'd gasped. "Tattoo ahoy."

"Well, not an anchor, that's bloody trite..." Rack had muttered, but then he'd moved on to the other nipple and Daniel had forgotten all about it...

But he's surely remembering now. Rack wasted no time. He'd learned a while back, during a rare lazy conversation lollygagging in bed, that Daniel had a bit of Cherokee in him – hence came the near-black hair and eyes. Nothing would do, then, after his decision to ink Daniel up, but finding just the right tribal design. "Full-chest, it's got to be," he'd mutter, poring over library books and trade magazines. "Linking you tit to tit, and going down to your navel. Broad and bright and sexy as hell. And it's got to mean you've been claimed, love. That you belong to someone. Me."

Daniel had peered over his shoulder at one depiction of a bear, and frowned. "Why not a flag with "Mine" written on it?" he joked.

Rack's eyes turned darkly dangerous and gloating. "That's your second tat, love." He hooked a finger into Daniel's jeans and slid it down, teasing. "Right... here. Happy trails, love."

They're doing both today. At least the outline of the big one, Rack's promised, and most definitely the flag. So his shirt's off, his jeans are off, and his boxers are down around his knees. His cock looks like it's frightened, and he can't blame it. He keeps hearing the *buzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz* from the other three stations in Rack's parlor, someone whimpering, and the no-nonsense bitch babe supreme doing that artwork telling this biker three times her size not to be a baby. And he's only getting something on his bicep.

He glances down to where the tribal markings have been sketched out all over his chest, shaved bare as a baby's bottom. "It'll itch like hell growing back in," Rack had soothed as he scraped a disposable razor over the muscles, "But you'll see. Never felt anything like this, you haven't." He'd tweaked one of the nipple rings. "Hurts so good, love. You'll fall for it. I know you."

He'll fall, all right. Right out of this chair, onto his ass, in a dead faint once Rack starts that thing going.

Looks like he's finished mixing the colors. "The flag first," he muses as he comes closer, devilish instrument in hand. Test *buzz*, test *buzz*.

Daniel looks down at the flag with its stake, drawn with such a skillful hand over the flat lines of his lower belly, sharp end pointing directly at his cock. "M I N E" scrolling across it. Something in him flutters, almost like he's getting excited – hell, maybe he is. Rack wants him that much. "Hey," he says softly, grabbing his lover's wrist before it descends. "You get an 'X' over your cock next. Okay?"

Rack's eyes flare. "X for where it marks the spot. Where they'll bump and bash against each other when I'm fucking you hard with your legs over my shoulders. What makes you think I hadn't planned it out already, love?" His finger slowly sketches it out, just above his own cock. "Got it all planned. And I'm gonna teach you how, so you can do me. Don't want any other tattoo gun on me but one what you're gripping."

The low buzz starts up again, and Daniel's cock is definitely interested now, twitching and filling a little against his thigh. Rack runs one gloved finger over it. "You want me to stop before we've started?" he asks, voice low and husky. "Take you in this booth, my hand over your mouth so no one can hear you holler while we're fucking?"

"Oh, hell, yes," Daniel breathes.

The corners of Rack's mouth turn up in a catlike grin. "Be a good boy, and I'll suck you off, swallow you down once I've got this flag done, eh? And I'll lick up every drop before we do your chest."

He lays his hand flat on Daniel's legs, trapping his growing cock beneath it. "But now, hold still... very, very still, love, not a peep, not a muscle moving..."

Daniel expects to jump when the needle hits his skin. But he doesn't. Instead, he moans soft and low. It hurts. Oh, hell, yes, it hurts. But what jumps is his heart rate, and his dick underneath Rack's hard hand, swelling up to full thickness as the gun slowly works its buzzing way down his skin.

"Oh, fuck, yeah," Rack murmurs, etching in the letters. "M I N E. Right above that lovely cock. Forever gonna be there. Like my mouth, my arse, my hands, taking you in any way I please, and you'll beg for it, won't you?"

Daniel's hands are gripping hard for another reason entirely now. He's going to come from the blissful pain of the needle and the sound of Rack's voice. "Yours," he rasps, his gut burning with the need to come, holding it back only for the sake of Rack's mouth on him soon as he's done here. "Always yours."

Rack pauses the buzzing for just a moment. He stares at Daniel, deep into him, examining his soul. Finally, he grins again, naughty and carefree and wild as the wind. "Damn straight you are. Just you wait till we get home, and I'll see you get the fucking of your life. Me in you, deep as ever I can go, with you riding me so I can see all this beauty sink and rise. Oh, yeah." He strokes gently. "Just you wait until I get you home."

The buzzing and the white-hot-glory pain start up again, and Daniel's struggling not to writhe in ecstasy. Wait until he gets home? Oh, no way.

He grins to himself, sly and secret, and groans with the burning bliss. 'Cause he's a smart guy, and they're both horny as hell.

They'll figure out a way to fuck in this booth.

CHAPTER FIVE

Daniel's sprawled on the bed, body shaking from head to foot. Rack's got him so worked up - sucking and playing with his dick, the newly healed piercings Daniel finally talked him into - that he's desperate for release - but he's not gonna get it yet, nuh-uh. Rack has Plans.

He wishes he could grind his cock against the mattress for some kind of relief. But Rack - grinning, flicking that metal-tipped tongue at him - has propped soft, squishy pillows under his groin, raising his ass in the air.

The thing about Rack - he talks pretty, he talks dirty, and he delivers. Good to remember. Promises of rimming? Daniel's never had it done, but wished he could try, just once. Sounds like his dreams are coming true.

"Told you I would." A cold bead of metal on a warm tongue paints a stripe down the length of his spine. He hears the lube bottle open and smells the wild cherry, right before chilly dollops of the stuff dribble into his finger-stretched hole. There's the soft *rip* of plastic wrap, and a strange sticky feeling as it's laid over him. "Didn't believe me, did you?"

Daniel shakes his head frantically.

Silver-ringed hands part his cheeks, and he feels Rack's heated breath deep inside. First short laps, then a long, lingering, circling lick, and then a sharp stab of the tongue - and he's going crazy. He'd be thrashing if Rack's arms weren't stretched out, holding him still.

"Like it kinky, baby?" he hears Rack's whisper, cherry-scented. "You taste so sweet. Gonna do this again. Do it till you come without a hand on your cock, till you soak those pillows beneath you, and you're begging for more." He caresses Daniel's ass cheek. "You feel like playing?"

Daniel manages to nod. "I told you," Rack purrs, rubbing hard. "The games are just beginning."

* * *

Daniel did it - he fucking did it, after begging Rack's permission for what felt like weeks. Got his tongue pierced. Stuck it between the pinchers and let his lover drive a needle through the thick meat, following that with a shining titanium bar and bead. And while yeah, he so regretted not being able to use his mouth for the ages that it took healing, he's 100% sure now it was worth it.

He *loves* the thing.

Sometimes he challenges Rack with their kisses now, so he can hear their bars go click-click, one

against the other. Gotta be careful of teeth, but when their tongues twine together or battle it out, the sound is like rattling bones or a cup full of loaded dice. Wild. Dangerous. Sexy as hell.

Makes all the other kisses spicier now, too. Like when he's got his mouth wrapped tight and hot around Rack's cock, listening to that filthy mouth gasp out promises he hopes to God will be kept, he can tap-tap his tongue against the dolphin, the guiche, the PA. Press it hard against the slit, dribbling strings of come, and listen to Rack scream at the feel of the metal. Or when he's rimming Rack, eating his lover out, running the cool bead over that puckered skin and feeling Rack thrash.

You gotta watch out for the quiet ones. Their smiles might show off a few sharp teeth.

And just a little bit of metal.

* * *

Okay, so this is unusual... this is seriously unusual. In the few short days since Daniel's known him, Rack has never needed an alarm clock. He seems to know, just by instinct, when dawn is coming. When light shoots over the yardarm, he pops up like a toaster pastry and flips right over onto Daniel, awake or asleep. If he is asleep, the abundance of arms, legs, and lips on him – all over him – and the hard, cold metal pressing into his hip – soon wake him up.

But today, as sunlight lazily edges into the sky and turns it lavender-pink, Rack stretches like a big cat and ends up snuggling into Daniel, latching on as if he's a teddy bear and not the Fuck Monster O'Love that he's really kinda enjoyed playing. It's... sweet.

And strange. "Hey, you," Daniel whispers, smoothing ruffles of disarranged bed head off Rack's face. "Feeling okay?"

Yawn. "Feelin' just fine, love..." Rack's fingers trail slowly down Daniel's chest, stopping to tweak lightly at the brightly-shining nipple rings. "God, those are lovely," he breathes. "An' all for me."

"Yours." Daniel turns on his side so that they're face-to-face, cock-to-cock, matching sets of morning wood pressing up against each other. Warm flesh to cold metal; it sends a gorgeous shiver down his spine. Rack gives him that devil's smile and shimmies his hips, but doesn't even reach for a kiss.

Daniel can't help but look at him strangely. Did he just think Rack was like a cat? The more he thinks about it... swift, sly, graceful, mischievous; knowing what he wants and to hell with the rest of the world. Six days out of seven out for a good romp... maybe once in a while he wants a good laze, and to have his tummy rubbed.

Go on, put whiskers on him. Rack the pierced cat.

Daniel gives him back an equally lazy smile. "Guess what I'm going to do to you?" he whispers, using Rack's tone. "Gonna climb under these covers now. I'll slip down until my face is level with your cock, and I'm going to suck it dry."

Rack shivers pleasantly. He rolls forward a bit – yep, cat – and pushes his groin against Daniel's.

"Sure you'd rather not..."

"Nope. Kinda got my mind set on this." Daniel starts wiggling, brushing his hands over every bit of smooth skin he can, tweaking every single piercing as he goes down. He has to curl up lest he fall off the bed, but once he's down in that dark cocoon, that gorgeous pierced cock level with his mouth, he's oh, so not sorry.

He climbs the stainless steel ladder with his tongue, up and down and up again, Sucks the dolphin into his mouth and then laves the long veins with hard, quick licks, letting his hand stray back to tug gently at the guiche. Rack's quivering now, making long, low yowling noises. Cat. Maybe on purpose? Daniel grins. Could be.

Finally, so delicate, he inserts the tip of his tongue into the PA and pulls. Rack makes a noise like nothing on heaven or earth, so he does it again. And again, until he can taste clear drops dribbling on his tongue.

He reaches up and rubs Rack's soft lower belly with his rough worker's hands, caressing the trail of light hair that leads down to his cock. Slowly, slowly he takes all of that delicious dick into his mouth, licking and sucking the way he's learned best and loves most.

And as Rack-cat mewls and writhes... it's Daniel who's almost purring.

* * *

The only time Rack is ever still is when he's doing a punch or some ink, and then you could probably balance a marble on a point in his hair. He just gets this deep-down Zen stillness that Daniel's only ever seen drugs bring to other people. How he does it? No idea.

Probably why the rest of the time Rack bounces around like Tigger on PCP. Never still. Even making a simple sandwich ("a bacon buttie, with none of that vegetable shit on there!" he'll argue with a fierce glare) he's a flurry of meat, butter and bread, knives, pans and plates, clattering out his own kitchen-STOMP until he has two plates of sizzling goodness – always making an extra for Daniel, whether he's said he wants one or not. Daniel always eats them. If you worship the great god Pork, how can you turn down something like that?

That's why this morning, when Daniel stretches himself lazily in bed and rubs at skin that's been sweated through, come on, and slept in, and announces that he needs a shower – and Rack warns him "Hurry it up, then, I want one myself" – he knows he doesn't have a prayer of being in there by himself for very long. Sure enough, his hair's barely wet before Rack's shoving the flimsy curtain aside, hopping under the stream, cursing the water's heat, and butting his own head under the jet that had been cleaning Daniel off.

Still, when he tosses his head back, wild points wet down into damp curls by the steaming water, gasping for air and grinning wildly at Daniel, Daniel gives in as usual. No – more than that – he really doesn't mind, not a bit. In fact, he waves a sponge lasciviously. "Wash your back, mister?"

"Not my back I care to have washed." Rack exaggerates a leer, waggling his eyebrows. They look at each other and burst out laughing. Then Daniel sets to on Rack's back – a little lower than his

shoulders, yeah – and front – at the same time, using teasing bare hands and slick soap instead of a lathery sponge.

Rack shudders and gasps at the touch of those hands. They've grown nimble and clever, and know now exactly how to manipulate their way around all those piercings, running lightly up and down, then dancing along Rack's cock or into the cleft between his ass cheeks. Gliding here, probing there.

"Dangerous weapon, you are," he mutters, hips rolling and voice raspy. "What, you're tryin' for sainthood here? Flawless lover and all that? It's early in the morning, no-" he inhales sharply- "no need. No one's perfect."

"Not that you're saying no?"

Rack tilts his head back, cords showing in his neck, as Daniel's hands work bath-time magic. "Hell, no."

"How about, maybe, yes, Daniel, yes?" Daniel pushes in just hard and deep enough with one finger, up to the knuckle, and twists exactly so to the right. "Yeah," he says over Rack's tile-rattling groan, dipping down under the steam and water to kiss him good and hard.

He thrusts his own swollen cock up against Rack's slim, slippery-wet, pierced prick to show him how interested he is in all the possibilities of the bright new day. "No need to do everything. But some of us just like to try our best."

They manage to kiss again, their hips rocking together and Daniel's fingers working on, twisting and plunging. Lips and tongues, hands and cocks. Hard. Deep. Wet.

In the end, they find they need to take another shower after the first one, but somehow they don't really mind.

* * *

Daniel's tattoos have all healed up, the bright colors sinking just below the skin. A layer of sweat makes the intricate tribal designs gleam, and he's noticed more than a few appreciative glances his way when he sweats through the white of his working T-shirts. Looks that would make Rack snarl and start talking, pretty damn loudly, about territorial rights.

And each new piercing he talked Rack into or Rack talked him into has also healed, leaving bright, suckable, tuggable silver loops strung through Daniel's earlobes, nipples, and navel. He's got to be careful about that when he's working – the thought of catching anything and tearing it out – ouch! But it's worth it to come home – or where he's starting to think of as home, the little studio apartment above Rack's shop.

Some days, like today, he just leans in the door and checks out the scene before heading upstairs. If he hears the tattoo gun buzzing from Rack's stall, he doesn't even bother to go in. Rack wouldn't notice a lap dance when he's deep into doing some ink.

Although the idea is tempting.

Needless to say, he's lost a lot of his inhibitions since he became Rack's one-and-only. How could he not?

Today it happens that Rack's not busy, and when Daniel sticks his head in – sweaty, grimy, stinking from a day's hard lifting and carrying – he's right there in a flash, demanding embraces, slinging his arm around Daniel's waist, and showing him off to the room full of waiting clients.

No shame, his Rack. Good thing, too.

"Mine," he growls, pulling Daniel hip-to-hip close. "All you bastards, hands and eyes off. This one belongs to me."

And with that, he pulls Daniel's head down, but not just for a kiss – for the kind of mouth-on-mouth, searing connection that makes them both weak at the knees. They feel it every time they do this. Know, again, that they're meant to be. When Rack backs away, Daniel can see that in the wild and hyperactive eyes he loves.

"Upstairs," Rack breathes. "Want you cleaned up and smelling sweet, I do. Ready for me when I'm done here."

Daniel snags two belt loops on the obscenely tight black jeans Rack wears and tugs them closer together, waist to waist and cock to cock. He can feel everything. If it weren't for his dream come true, this shop, he knows Rack would toss him over the counter and take exactly what he wants, right now. "Think you'll be done early?" he teases.

"If I can half bloody help it, you bugger." Rack's eyes are dilated and the bulge in his jeans twitches. They've got an audience, but they couldn't care less.

Daniel traces a finger down the tattooed "Rack" on his lower belly, all the way to the top of his jeans. "I'll be waiting."

"Damn right you will. Now go, so I can get done here and up with you where I belong." A hard swat on the ass sends Daniel laughing up the stairs, aimed for the shower.

Dirty clothes off and kicked into one corner. One admiring glance at his decorations, unhidden by any clothing, and he's ducking underneath the cooling shower spray. The cold water is bliss, calming his rampant erection down just enough to keep it all under control. He wants to save it for Rack. He knows that Rack's down there, going through inventory lists in his head, saving it for him.

Out of the shower and naked, considering what next. Half his clothes live here, and he's got a share in the cheap, thin towels they buy to save on expenses. More important things to buy, you know. Condoms. Lube. Toys.

Clean, hair wet, sun still peeking over the horizon, and he's got maybe two, three hours to kill. Some days he goes back downstairs, shoots the shit with clients, shows off his own ink, or hangs around changing the CDs for Rack's booth, but most often, it's naptime until the shop closes at nine.

Used to be, when it was cooler, he'd shrug on clean jeans and a T and flop down atop Rack's battered old double bed. But now that it's so hot... he hesitates, this one night, his hand on a pair of worn old denims. This studio doesn't have A/C, only some creaky old fans. Rack sinks his money into the shop, making it go. If he wants to be cool, he'll have to go back down – but fuck, he's exhausted. Maybe just the T-shirt and boxers... maybe just the boxers...?

Oh, forget about it. Daniel switches all the battered fans on high as they can go, giving a delicious shiver when the air hits the droplets of water still beading down his body. Now *that* is more like it.

He stretches out full-length atop the ancient, cool-feeling quilt and lets the air play over his dampened body. His hand drifts down just once to pluck at the healed PA, but the twinge of over-excitement – that zing that comes from waiting and thinking all day – is almost too much, and he pulls back. Contents himself instead with folding his hands so they just touch the inked-in “Rack”, and lets his eyes drift shut. Pleasantly aware of his cock, lying half-full against his thigh. Waiting for full dark and for Rack to come and leap in the bed with him. Wrestling. Rolling. Rutting. Oh, yeah.

He's falling asleep. Should take off his glasses, but he's so tired...

* * *

The rustle and squeak of aging bedsprings is his only alarm clock, but Daniel still jars out of sleep with a mumbled "Huh?"

Cool hands – no, icy, cold ones – glide from his feet, up his calves, to his thighs. He gasps and flinches, toes curling under and knees lifting just a little. "There's my good boy," Rack's voice purrs. "Thought you'd like that. Had my hands soaking in ice water for minutes, now, I have, so I could wake you up proper."

The wet raspiness of a tongue follows in the wake of those cold hands, lapping its way up his leg. "Mmm," Rack hums. "Taste like salt, you do. Salt and soap. Been lying up here in the hot, dreaming of me?"

It's dark, no lights on. Daniel can't see anything by the weak streetlamps and the moon outside, except for the occasional glint of silver. "Rack," he murmurs. "Don't you dare stop that, 'kay?"

The mouth hesitates at its nuzzling on his knee. "No intention of it, love." The cold fingers stroke at the inside of his thighs. "Warm up after a bit, but enjoy it while it lasts."

And oh, God, he does. The feel of those icy hands stroking and petting his overheated flesh feels like making love in the snow, only better. And that mouth is getting ever closer to the inside of his legs, close enough that rough blond spikes are brushing against the head of his swelling cock.

"Gonna suck you first," Rack murmurs, pressing his lips to the tip. Daniel jumps and yelps – his mouth is cold, too!

"How the –"

"Ice chips. Wanted a special treat for such a hot piece just waiting for me." Cool lips brush over the head of his cock again, pausing for the briefest suck before he's nuzzling again, nosing against the heaviness of Daniel's balls. "Worth it," he's saying. "Fell asleep with your hands on my mark, you did. That earns you a special treat."

Slowly, far, far too slowly, that ice-chilled mouth slides over the crown of Daniel's dick, tongue flicking at the PA, and down, down, down, until he feels himself bump the back of Rack's throat and his punk's nose is nestled in his thatch of dark curls.

"God," Daniel pants, all he can think of. Deities come help him, he's being deep-throated by a popsicle on a July afternoon and if this isn't heaven he doesn't know what is. The cold ought to make him shrink, but fuck if it doesn't turn his whole body into one flashing burn of *want*. Desperate for something to cling onto, he reaches down and manages to take Rack by the head, by those stiffly gelled spikes, and push his fingers through them. "God!"

He hears Rack laugh around his cock, and the ripples are un-fucking-believable. Rack draws off slowly, sucking hard as he goes – then plunges back down, dragging just the barest hint of teeth along the big vein. Daniel yells, his chest lifting off the bed with the intensity of it.

Back again, and now Rack's suckling the tip, using one cool hand to pump the rest of him, saliva-slick. His tongue's teasing over the PA, just not stopping, and it hurts but it's the best kind of hurt ever and it's something he'd never have known about if not for this amazing man in bed with him. Blowing him like he's the best-tasting thing ever.

"Gonna make you scream," Rack whispers in between long, lavishing sucks. That fist is never still, and Daniel's writhing now. "And this is just the start tonight, love. Your turn next to make me holler and wriggle. Then I'm going to be in you, bareback, so you can feel all that cold metal just sinking deep inside. All those little silver balls, teasing at you. You want that, yeah? You want me?"

"You." Daniel's hands are fisted into the quilt, now; he'd tear Rack's hair out otherwise. "You!"

Rack's tongue moves so fast up and down his shaft that it's like little bolts of lightning. One hand, still chilly, rolls Daniel's tightening balls together, just hard enough for that good pain, while the other steals down to tease at the tight pucker between his legs.

"Make you yell for me," Rack growls. "Gonna fuck you all night long, Daniel. Hope you enjoyed your nap, 'cause you're not gettin' any sleep tonight. Been thinking about you all day long. All day, in those damned tight jeans, pressing me down when I wanted to come fetch you on site and have you in your truck, to hell with all who might be watching. Wanted you to come down to the shop and put on a show with me."

Rack swallows the length of Daniel's throbbing cock once more, then pulls back to breathe heavily across the tip. "You want to come for me, baby, don't you? I can feel it. All tight and heavy. Pulsing. Ready for pop for me. Come on for me, then, come on. Let it all go."

Daniel thrashes. That mouth – that voice – that tongue – God, he's almost there –

"Or maybe you just need a little more convincin'." Rack's voice is pure sweet evil. He slips the tip of his sharp tongue underneath the PA and gives it a good pull, scraping his nails down Daniel's thighs at the same time.

The world goes white, and his body shakes as if a seizure's hit it. The orgasm tears through Daniel as if it's a set of talons, shredding him apart. He is yelling for Rack, loud words that make no sense, feeling only the cool suction and the working of throat as Rack swallows and swallows, not letting a drop escape him.

When the last of the shocks have faded and he lays there, boneless, he's only just aware of Rack wriggling up to nestle under his bare arm. Rich amusement in that voice: "Good for you too, pet?"

Daniel manages to moan something.

"Glad to hear it."

"Smart-ass," Daniel says huskily, gulping for breath. He looks up to see, and finds his eyes have adjusted enough, now, that he can see Rack's face, down to the dab of semen at the corner of his smirking mouth.

The blond puts on an innocent face. "Good day at the office?"

Daniel shakes his head, and laughs, struggling to regain his strength. He so owes Rack for that one, and he's going to see that he gets it. "Yeah," he rasps. "Better night at home."

"Too right," Rack murmurs, leaning in for a kiss.

"Yeah," Daniel growls against those lips. His arms reach up, and he flips Rack over. His own cock, hard and flat against his belly, glitters silvery fire in the moonlight. "But Rack? It's nowhere near over yet."

Rack reaches up with his arms and stretches, thrusting up his hips. "Good."

* * *

Daniel lays on his stomach on the cool, clean bed. Bare of any clothing, he savors the play of the fan as it runs the length of him. Crisp sheets stretch tight under his body, and there's a fresh pillow to rest his cheek on. His hair's wet from a shower, citrus-scented, and sticks up in drying peaks. A slim, ringed hand runs through it, teasing it higher. "Look like me now, you do," Rack teases him.

"Mmm," Daniel responds, too comfortable for words. His lover's sitting on the back of his thighs, balanced with a knee on either side, just idly playing with the textures of his skin. Nude as well, but still smelling of inks and antiseptics from a long day's work.

"Finished that seascape tat today," Rack murmurs, drawing lines down Daniel's back with one fingernail. He leans forward, and the chain looped between his nipple piercings jingles. "Beautiful, it is. All those greens and blues. Wish you'd seen it. All over this woman's shoulders – the ocean. Like catching the Pacific in a bottle."

Daniel mumbles again, arching into Rack's touch. He can feel the hard press of Rack's cock, ready and willing, nudging against the cleft of his ass, but neither one is ready for sex. Not just yet – "no matter how ready I am, every time I only look at you, sometimes I like watching a bit, waiting, making it all the better when I do get to sink deep inside you." Right now, Rack's fucking his skin with his fingers – talented hands that can make art out of anything.

"You need more ink," Rack whispers hungrily, creating loops and swirls with his nail. "A map. Like one from the olden times – here there be dragons an' all that, you know? Your skin tone, that'd look fucking fantastic."

Daniel does raise up a little, laughing. "A map? Rack, did I actually fuck your brains out this morning?"

"Git." A light swat to his ass that makes them both moan, before Rack gathers himself. "Nah. But there's this tour, see. Some of the best ink slingers get to go on it. It's worldwide, see."

"Oh." Daniel's heart sinks into his stomach. If he's mentioning it, he's been invited. On the one hand – pride. His honey's tops in what he does. On the other hand – separation. And he's not ready for this to end, not in any way. "You planning on it?"

"Dunno." More sketching on his blank skin. Rack pauses, then reaches for a fruity-scented gel marker on their bed stand. "Would have done, a few weeks ago."

"Why not now?"

The marker is cool on his back. "'Cause of you, you great git. Not leaving you. Want you to come with me."

"But my –"

"Yeah." Heavy sigh. "Your own business, like. Can't ask you to chuck it all for a six week jump around the globe."

Six weeks! God. If it was one week... maybe two... but six? Sure, he doesn't have any jobs lined up right now, but... "So you're not going? Sounds like something that could really help your career." He tries to turn his head to look at Rack. "It'd make you famous."

Rack shrugs, sketching away. "Small-town name's good enough for me. And there's always next year. Happens I do some really class stuff between now and then, odds are I'll get asked again." He caps the marker abruptly and throws it to the side. "I've talked enough, love. Want to put my time to a better use."

Rack pushes forward, trailing his fingers down both of Daniel's hips. "Want you. In me, or me in you. Doesn't matter. I'll ride you at a gallop or break down the doors. But I need you. More than fame or money. Got it?"

That devil's smile twinkles over his face. "Besides, I like you best all pliant from working hard, and

you'd have nothing to do on this trip. Worn-out Daniel means a Daniel I can do what I want with."

"Mmm." Daniel lets out a low, rolling laugh. "Like what you just said?"

"And then some." Rack rolls off, and warm hands push at him. "Turn over, pet. Let me see your face, and that sweet swollen dick you've been rubbing against my good clean sheets. Roll over or you're sleeping in the wet spot tonight, get me?"

Still grinning, Daniel corkscrews until he's on his back. Easy and graceful as a cat, Rack straddles him again, the tip of Rack's dick resting on his stomach and arse poised to take him in. Daniel thrusts up a little, PA gleaming, and finds Rack already stretched and open. "God, you're sexy," Daniel breathes.

That gets him the famous Rack smirk. "Nah. Just know what I like." And with that, Rack slowly sinks down on Daniel's cock, drawing him into the hot wet channel that still fits like a glove that's just a little too tight. Working him with muscles God never invented, picking up the pace until they're at that punishing gallop Rack had promised. Rising and falling until all Daniel can do is throw his head back and reach out blindly with both hands to grasp Rack's hips and help him move.

But deep down inside, even when most higher brain power's been removed, he's thinking. Rack needs to go on that tour. Needs to be recognized for the genius he is. It doesn't occur to him to be jealous, or worry that someone might try to steal Rack away – Rack wouldn't ever leave him. He's not that kind. Hasn't been since the first "can I fuck you?".

No. He has to take this tour. And maybe... just maybe... Daniel's mouth curls in a brief smile. Could be they'll need a roadie carpenter to go along. Someone who can set up tables and booths, cubicles and chairs.

He'll find out in the morning where's he's going to go with this.

But right now, slippery-sliding, hot-wet-tight, he's coming with Rack...

CHAPTER SIX

Daniel likes watching Rack sleep, on those rare mornings he wakes up before his hyperactive partner does. If he's sleeping sound and peaceful, he's tucked into a warm ball, arms and legs wrapped around himself. Flexible guy – as Daniel well knows.

If he's having a really *good* dream, he'll be latched on like Daniel's his own teddy bear, unconscious morning wood jabbing at his hip (those being the days he says 'screw it' to letting Rack get more rest, and wakes him up).

If he's really and truly dead to the world, he'll be sprawled on his back like a child, arms and legs akimbo, sometimes sprawled partially over Daniel's own, longer limbs. Then, Daniel might reach out and stroke him on the arm, the chest, his flank, whatever's closest. Sometimes waking him, sometimes not.

But this morning – something's different. Rack's curled around himself, but he's making small whimpering noises in his sleep. That's what's woken Daniel up. He peers bleary-eyed at his partner, then fumbles for his glasses and shoves them on. Something's not just different, it's wrong. Rack's sweating. Granted, there's no air-conditioning and it's summer, but they've got fans playing over the whole of the bed and his own skin is dry. Rack's sweating, and his mouth is turned down in the saddened look of a kicked puppy. It looks particularly pitiful with the lip beads and the labrets and eyebrow piercings.

"Sweetheart?" Daniel shakes him gently. "Come on, Rack, wake up. Are you having a nightmare?"

Rack shrugs off his hand with a moan, and not one of pleasure. Now Daniel's well and truly worried. The skin he touched was hot – burning up. He lays the back of his hand against Rack's forehead, and it's scalding to the touch. "Baby, you're sick. Wake up, okay?"

"Don' wanna," Rack whines. He makes scrabbling motions, as if to pull covers over his face – except they've slept naked, without even a sheet on them. "Need to rest, git."

Daniel shakes his head. "Nuh-uh. Not here. It's an oven."

"S'just warm," Rack grumbles.

"Warm? I could bake cookies on your back." Daniel caresses it, trailing his way down the spinal column. "You can't work like this. I'm going down to leave a note for the desk girl to reschedule everything."

Rack's eyes fly open at that. "Dan – nah, love, you can't! Got a full day booked, I have!"

"Yeah, and you also have the flu. Or a cold. How many times have you yelled at the staff for showing up and so much as coughing?"

"But I'm not sick," Rack protests. "Only a bit down this morning. Maybe drank a bit much last night –" but just then, as if to prove Daniel's point, Rack lets loose with a mighty sneeze.

"Stay there. I'm doing this. You may hate me now –"

Rack's hand fumbles for him. "Don't hate you. But don't make me lay in bed here all day –"

"Don't worry about that. I'm just going to get the sign. Think you can find a pair of shorts and a T-shirt?"

Rack raises his head, bloodshot eyes peering warily. "You're not dragging me to any doctor, are you?"

"Nope. You're coming with me to my job today, so I can keep an eye on you."

"Your job? But I thought – you never asked before –"

"Because I wasn't going to drag you away from this place unless I had to." Daniel presses a gentle kiss on Rack's forehead. "Today, however? Necessary. So get dressed if you can. We're going back to where I live. How about that? You'll get the tour and everything."

"Been there before, tosser. Seen what's to be seen..."

"Not that up close and personal. We always crash here. And you'll get to see it really well." Daniel puts his hand on Rack's forehead. "First thing for you is a cold bath in that old claw foot tub of mine."

Rack goes almost limp as that thought hits him. "Figured you'd like that." Daniel scrambles out of bed and steps back into his jeans. "Try and be ready when I get back."

* * *

Somehow – through strength of will, maybe, or just pure stubbornness – Rack's dressed and standing defiantly, if weaving, by the time Daniel gets back up to him. It was no trouble clearing things with their multi-pierced and inked-up desk girl, who said – almost as if she looked forward to the ruckus – "His customers are gonna pitch a fit. But I'll make sure everyone knows he's not available."

She scares Daniel. Just a little. But after all, she does have the Wicked Witch of the West inked on her neck.

They go down the back stairs, to where Daniel's got his truck parked, where he tucks Rack into the passenger seat, makes sure he's buckled up tight despite noisy, growly objections, and scurries around the truck to get behind the wheel. Kicking it into gear, he runs a hand over Rack's half-bare,

too-hot thigh. "Gonna get you feeling better, baby, and that's an order."

Rack mumbles something grouchy at him. Daniel ignores it, except to stick out his own pierced tongue at the man. "Hey, you dragged me into your world. For one day, you can play in mine. So there."

* * *

They get to Daniel's house right around the time he'd normally open for business, but he opts to get going a little late and takes care of the most important thing first – getting his lover settled in a tub brimful of cool water. Rack sinks in gratefully, up to his chin. The sight of all that bare flesh and metal glimmering underwater is enough to make Daniel really, really wish Rack was healthy and that this could be a group project, but he manages to rein it in.

He smooths back sweaty hair and orders Rack that when the water and the cool air have managed to get him feeling human again, he's to get out, find the overlong T-shirt Daniel's going to lay out for him, and crawl under the covers. Then sleep until noon, when he's going to be stuffed with chicken soup and orange juice whether he likes it or not.

Rack chuckles at him. "Always knew you had brass ones," he murmurs, his eyes drifting shut.

Daniel makes sure he won't slip under and drown by thrusting a bath pillow under Rack's head and wedging it there. "Yeah? Well, you pierced 'em to get them that way."

"Smart-arse."

"Damn straight."

"Better not be."

"Shhh." Daniel kisses him again, then backs off. "Bath. Bed. Sleep. Lunch. Got it?"

Rack manages to lift one hand and give him a two-fingered salute. Laughing, Daniel backs off and lets him get on with it.

He heads out to his workshop. Good thing he's got no heavy outside work today. Just working on general in-house things, piecing together rocking chairs and such. The chairs are really taking off, especially now that he's taken a few design lessons from Rack. The scrollwork on their tops is really popular.

The smell of the fresh wood and the machine oil comforts him, as it always does when he enters his workshop. Heavy jeans - Dickies, as they call them? Check. Thick protective vest? Check. Safety glasses? Yeah, they make him look like a bug over his glasses, but he'd rather look stupid and be safe. Check. Work gloves? Check.

He picks up a nice cut piece of cedar, then pauses and listens. Rack, swishing lazily in the bathtub? Check. Okay, he can get started.

The cedar's almost all the way spun to a nice, rounded shape – the spindle for a chair – when he hears splashing. He frowns. That was sooner than he'd thought. Rack's done already? Maybe he got cold.

Or maybe...

And it doesn't surprise him at all, not really, when Rack comes shuffling into his workshop. He's got the oversized T-shirt on, all right, but from somewhere he's dug up a pair of Daniel's way-too-big sweatpants and a pair of socks that are so long on him that the toes flop. He's bleary-eyed but looks belligerent, and flops down in a floor model rocking chair as if daring Daniel to say a word. Daniel bites down hard on saying that particular chair is promised to a really finicky old lady, and lets Rack be. He'll just have to find a way to... sanitize it... before he calls her to arrange delivery.

"Bad boy," he does chide, when he turns off the lathe and puts the cedar down. "I told you –"

"Bugger what you told me, love," Rack croaks. "I'm not layin' in bed all day away from you. I can rest here just as easy. Damned things are comfortable as you said they were."

Daniel pinks with pride. "Really? You think so?"

Dozy nod.

"Think you could nap in there?"

Huge yawn.

Daniel keeps quiet – no sense pushing it – and scans around for things that won't hinder Rack's naptime. Noisy machines are out. He's got plenty of sketching to do, and lots of measuring. It'll throw him off schedule, but so what? Rack's tucking himself up into his "cozy" ball in the chair, head pillowed on his hand and blue, blue eyes at half-mast, watching him.

He sits, picking up a thick drafting pencil and the headrest of a chair, and starts to sketch.

"Love?" Rack murmurs.

"Yeah?" Does he want orange juice, cool water, maybe some soup...? A hug?

"You look like a fucking pierced praying mantis with those goggles on."

Flushing dark red, Daniel peels the offending objects off. So he'd forgotten. Rack glances down. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Daniel says stiffly.

"Really sorry."

"I said, it's okay."

"Make it up to you later with a blowjob?"

"Rack, right now you couldn't blow up a balloon. Just – rest there, okay?"

He feels, more than hears, Rack's smile. "Fussy about your workshop as I am about mine," he says drowsily. "Like that, I do."

And he would, wouldn't he? He really, really would. Daniel half-laughs, shakes his head, and moves on. Measure twice, make the mark where later he'll cut once. Sketch out the lines for the circular saw to curl through, smooth semi-circles and long ovals and shaped seats. Oddly enough, the soft clinking and clanking seems to lull Rack into another doze, and when he chances another look over, his lover's eyes are shut.

Well, if it works for him...

They only have one interruption, mid-morning, when a young couple – looking college-age, maybe post-grad – come in to the showroom, clasping hands and staring curiously around. They peek through the glass and give Rack a puzzled stare, but when they catch Daniel's eye they rap hopefully.

He comes out, stripping off his work gloves, casting a glance back at Rack to make sure he's still peaceful. "Something I can do for you?"

The female of the couple has a labret she plays with nervously while clutching her - boyfriend's? – husband's? – hand. "Um, we got this loft apartment, recently, and we heard you had good prices?" she ventures. "Stuff that'll last, costs a lot more than Goodwill, but it won't fall apart on you?"

He's heard worse endorsements of his trade. "I do a lot of everything," he says kindly, leaning back against a hand-carved table. Most of it he can already tell is gonna be out of their price range, but he can sense they feel a kinship with him because of his pierced ears and eyebrow. Like he's on their side. And sort of, he is.

Gently, he tries to steer them toward the plain pieces in the back corner. "Over here is what you're going to want to look at. What are you interested in? A chair, barstool, futon?"

"A bed," the boy blurts, before turning bright red. The girl flushes, although not quite so pink, and squeezes his hand nervously.

"Um... yeah. Our studio's pretty small, and we were... thinking? That maybe if we had some kind of bed built just to fit then maybe we'd have a little more room?"

"A loft," Rack's voice announces from the doorway between work- and showroom. "A proper loft is what you need. Bed up on stilts, good and sturdy."

The girl looks delighted. "Hey, I know you! You did my piercing."

He peers at her. "So I did. Healing up nicely, then, is it?"

She pinks a third time and nods. Rack leers at her. "Dan here's my boyfriend," he announces, wobbling over to sling an arm around Daniel's waist. "Can build anything you take a fancy to, he can. And a loft's what you want. Could have a lot of room to roll about in, then, and keep stuff underneath it."

Daniel has to admit, it's a good idea. He can use some cheap, sturdy wood and brace something like that together so it'll never fall apart – and probably well under their budget, too. The couple glances at each other, communicating in that silent way partners have, before turning back to Daniel with beaming faces – and happy looks at Rack for being such a genius.

When they've gone, a price and a date agreed upon, Daniel puts his arm around Rack – still holding him by the waist – and hoists him up. "You had to do that, didn't you?" he scolds gently.

Rack grins up at him like a four-year-old with illicit chocolate on his cheeks. "Made you a sale, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. But you got out of your chair like a naughty boy." Daniel kisses his temple. "Back you go. And I don't care if a Vanderbilt comes marching through here this afternoon, you're gonna stay there, OK?"

Rack pretends to pout, but as Daniel settles him into the chair he can tell the weakened artist is happy enough to be sitting back down again. He huddles in on himself. Daniel strokes down his arms. "Comfortable?"

Sleepy nod.

"Thirsty? Hungry?" Shake of the head. "You're okay just like that?" Nod.

"Okay, then, last call."

Rack smiles at him, sweet and sleepy. "Talk to me," he says softly. "While you're workin' over there, and I can smell the wood and hear the little clatters. Tell me a proper bedtime story. Maybe I'll be good and drift off like a well-behaved boy."

Daniel grins, picking up a rocking chair headrest to sketch. "Tell you a story? About what?"

"Mmm." Rack's eyes flutter shut. "About what you'd do to me. If we had a loft big as luxurious as they're gonna have."

"A whole wide field to roll around in?" Daniel suggests slyly. "What would I do?"

"Yeah..."

"Let's see." He picks up his pencil and draws the first line – soft, gentle, curving. "I'd have us both up there, still dressed in our day's clothes. There's just enough room between the ceiling and the bed that I can get on my knees, one on either side of your calves."

"Mmm, I like this story. Go on."

"I'd lean over, taking my weight on my arms, and I'd unzip you with my teeth. Catching the smell of you as the zipper comes down and licking each little bit as it's exposed. Then I'd take you in my mouth – just your tip – and I'd lick and swirl my tongue like you were an ice cream cone."

Rack shifts, but he's smiling. "Yeah. Good story."

"You being good over there?"

"Good as gold. Go on, already."

"Then... then I'd slide my mouth over every bit of you and suck. Gentle at first, then hard. I'd count each bar on your ladder with my tongue, and I'd suck each one as I pulled back off, really... slowly... and then I'd lick your tip again, all wet for me now. I'd push the tip of my tongue through your PA, and into the slit. Catch all that juice already bubbling up for me to taste."

"God, if you could see how you look... all busy bent over that wood, pencil sketching away, glasses on and so intelligent... talking like a gutter waif..."

"Be good," Daniel admonishes. "You're supposed to be falling asleep, here."

"Am being good." Rack wriggles. "Look, Ma, no hands."

"Mentions of Ma, here? Bad. Anyway," Daniel says, drawing on – fluid, liquid lines – "then I'd take your balls in my mouth, one right after another. Suck on them. Roll them against each other."

Rack wiggles again. "And your hands?"

"Where do you think? One of them's massaging your hip, and the other's sneaking its way back to your pucker. Just circling it, ever so gently. Maybe pushing just a little."

"Slick?"

"With my saliva. Pushing just a little bit, and maybe it slips in far enough for me to touch you inside, where you really like it."

"Hard?"

"Hard. With my fingernail. I'd watch you go crazy, then, and meanwhile I'd still be sucking at you, maybe working my way back down, bar by bar, pulling you deeper in..."

Rack gives a tremendous shudder and slumps back into his rocking chair. "God," he murmurs weakly. "I've taught you entirely too damn well."

Daniel finishes the design. Look at it one way, and it's just abstract lines. Look at it another way, and it's two lovers, tangled together. He's been making it as a surprise for Rack's studio. He'll see the cleverness of it, and he'll love it. He puts down his pencil and grins at his partner. "You just ruined my sweatpants, didn't you?"

Weak nod. Huge yawn. "You think you can sleep now?"

Dozy, barely-there dip of the head. "Good," Daniel says gently, ignoring his own hard-on. Yeah, Rack has taught him all too well. But he can wait until his lover's well again.

And he thinks he'll build two lofts, one for the couple, and one for Rack's apartment. One they can fit a drawing table underneath, and maybe the rocking chair as well. One they can fuck on top of, where he can blow Rack as hard as he wants.

Rack's breathing is slow, deep, and easy. Daniel suspects he'll be making another chair for the finicky old-lady customer. He can't part with this one.

But that's okay, because his lover's gotten what he wanted. And he's spending the day here with him. Even helping. They're side by side, again – always – a team.

He picks up another piece of wood, and blows a kiss at the slumbering punk curled up in a granny chair. "Sleep well, sweetheart," he murmurs.

And he sets back to work, a happy man.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After three days of soup, orange juice, and lounging in the rocker that Daniel's decided just to give to him, Rack's back to his old self. This is good, and this is bad. Once he realized Daniel would take care of him like that, he did an about-face and became possibly the most demanding – but demandingly affectionate – patient on the planet.

Shamelessly snuggling up like a helpless kitten in the mornings, mewling for aspirin and something to drink. Wrapping an old quilt around himself and rocking, watching Daniel work. Demanding fuck-talk stories that, despite Daniel's better efforts, finally turned into hands-on demonstrations (thankfully, when no customers were around). Ruining shirts with soup spills and sweatpants with come stains and socks with sawdust and curly wood shavings.

Driving Daniel straight up the wall... and back into his arms at the bat of an eyelid.

But this morning, still in his wide, soft bed instead of Rack's old wreck, he's the one who feels playful fingers crawling up his side to his nipple, tweaking the ring gently. "Wakey-wakey," a voice singsongs in his ear. "Someone's feelin' all better this morning."

Daniel lets himself grin lazily. Now this is more like it. A hot mouth follows those curious fingers, sucking at his piercing, threading a heated tongue through the loop and circling. His morning wood perks up at the feel of that – of Rack, lavishing an equal mix of lust of love on him – and starts to rise, tenting the covers. "Morning."

Rack grins at him – an evil grin that promises no good, and every kind of good he can imagine – and slip-slide disappears beneath the covers, kissing his way down Daniel's nipples and stomach. The tongue laps one more time before he feels, buzzed against his ribs: "Morning to you."

And, because Rack doesn't miss a thing, a warm hand wraps around his cock and jacks it slowly. "And good morning to this. Hello, Dick. Missed you, I have."

Daniel can't help but laugh. "He's been by to visit."

"Yeah, but not for a proper playtime." Rack's mouth creeps down Daniel's body, dropping hot little biting kisses along chest, hip, leg. Lavishing love on his thigh muscle, which Daniel flexes for him. Laughing softly against the twitching muscle.

"Hey, you. I think your aim's a little off." Daniel slides a hand down his own torso and tilts his cock towards Rack's teasing little mouth.

"Could be I'm still ill. Might need a little onboard guidance."

The mouth creeps a little closer, then lifts up and begins bobbing around. Dropping those same nipping kisses on his inner thigh, his tightening balls, tugging at the guiche with his teeth. "Seems I'm lost, love." He moves up to the nest of wiry hair, nuzzling in, then bites at one of Daniel's fingers encircling his own cock. "Have I found it now?"

He sucks the finger in, laving it with his tongue. Draws off with a disappointed sigh. "I'm totally at sea, here. That's too small, and it doesn't quite taste the same. Now if it were your luscious cock I had in my mouth, I'd be able to taste salt and it'd feel all slick against my lips, it would. And it would have that sharp silver tang at the tip of it that I could play with."

The kisses and the talk have gotten Daniel breathing quickly, in short sharp pants. "Think I can help you out there," he says. Though his cock's so stiff and full that it aches, he moves it just a little, and by some magic of happenstance bumps it square against that sweet, filthy mouth.

A tongue steals out to tap his ring. "Ah, now we're gettin' somewhere," Rack's voice teases. *Click, click, click* goes his tongue stud against the PA. "There's that silver I was looking for. Think I've found it, pet? Think this might be what wants attention?"

He drags his lips down the length, lapping gently. "Oh, look at this, then. It's all big. Is that for me, Daniel? How dark it is. Is it swollen up with blood and punk just waiting for my mouth?"

Daniel just manages a groan. His other hand comes down to thread the fingers through Rack's hair, pushing closer, while the other lets his cock rest against it for Rack to play with.

The bead drags back up him, along the length of his large, pulsating vein. "Bump, bump," the voice goes on. "This tastes even better. And it moves, can you feel that? Like a buzzing. Bzz, bzz, against my lips. I wonder, does it want something? Maybe something I can give it?"

He reaches the head of Daniel's cock and swirls his tongue around it, dipping into the slit. "There's that sweet salt I was hunting for. Oh, and lots of it, too. This must be Daniel's prick, dripping for me. Like it always does, because he knows what my hungry little mouth gets to do with it." He bites down, ever so softly, then sucks hard, hard enough that Daniel inhales sharply, back arching off the bed.

"Fuck!" It's better – worse – than anything, not being able to see Rack. He can feel Rack's mouth sliding down his cock, that bead pressing hard on the underside, but he can't see the white-blond curls or even the occasional wicked gleam in those eyes when Rack flickers a glance up at him.

And Rack's working him like a popsicle – gliding down and sucking up, devouring every drop of the precious pre-come that bubbles out. He taps out a primal rhythm on the PA until Daniel's hands are clutching into fists in the covers.

"Let me see you," Daniel begs. "Push off the covers. Fuck!"

The mouth gives one last swirl, then pulls off entirely. "Fuck, you said? Now I suppose that might be arranged... now, I wonder if... here, now, I'm lost again."

"Rack..."

He feels a nose bumping his hip, moving slowly downward with circular scrapes of a tongue against the skin. "There's something else I might be looking for here," he says tauntingly. "But it's all hidden now, isn't it? There's a shame. If someone were to turn over, they might just find themselves surprised most pleasant-like. But if he just lies still, then..."

Oh, holy fuck! Daniel struggles, all coordination in his arms and legs gone, successfully moving only at the sound of Rack's low triumphant laughter and the feel of hands pushing him onto his side.

He's done playing, now. "You smell of come," he breathes. "Come and raspberry lube. Got to have you. Taste you. Roll over, come on, keep going – there, stop, on your side!" He nips at Daniel's ass cheek, hard enough to leave a bruise.

Daniel moans. His cock is lying full, fat and heavy on the sheet, with just not enough friction at all. "Don't you touch yourself," Rack orders. "Not a hand goes near that what isn't mine, you understand?" Slim fingers snake over and squeeze him. "And I will touch you. Just not as much as you want me to. Not while I'm doing this, too..."

That triple-damned tongue bead drags across Daniel's tightened-up pucker, poking in just the tiniest bit. Daniel bites back a scream and thrashes, trying to buck into Rack's hand. That earns him a slap on the hip. "You behave! Or you'll have no more of this." Lap, lap, lap – circling around, dipping in, scraping against the sensitive skin.

Daniel thrashes, caught between the loose fingers that occasionally jack his burning cock and the tongue that's mercilessly fucking his hole. "You're gonna – kill me –" he manages to gasp.

"Bloody well hope so," Rack growls, before burrowing in again, forming his tongue into a point and poking in deeply. "There, now." His breath is hot and moist. "I feel those balls gettin' nice and tight. Drawin' up all close and neat to your body. About ready to shoot, aren't you? Gonna get spunk all over my fingers and your nice clean sheets that you've taken such good care of me in."

He draws in a shaking breath. "And you know what I'll do, then? I'll take your hand, still shaking from the high, and I'll suck every bit of come off those long, hard-working fingers. Then I'll wrap them around my own cock and you'll jack me until I come, loud, hollering out your name until the neighbors ten blocks away can hear and guess what it is your naughty, wicked hand is doin' to me." He pushes his hips against Daniel's knees and he can feel just how hard Rack is, too.

"You want that?" he growls. "You want this?" He laps circles and his hand pumps hard, harder, hardest –

"Gonna – gonna come –"

"When I say you can, pet." Rack keeps jacking him. "And I say that you come – now." He thrusts his tongue deep once more, and licks at Daniel from the inside. That bead taps at his sweet spot and he can't help it, God, a man made of steel couldn't help it. Daniel damned near jack-knifes in half, the whole of his body spasming, and shoots, spurts of hot and dripping come that fill Rack's hand and dribble off Rack's fingertips onto the bed. All the while that bead and tongue are working him,

totally without pity, until all that's left is a shaking mess of a man.

There's wiggling under the covers, the vague feeling of a body slithering up the length of him, and then Rack's face pops out, eyes full of the devil and lips swollen, red. "Won't ask you to kiss me," he taunts. "But here's something for you to think about..."

He lifts the first of his dripping fingers to his mouth and sucks it in, greedy, fucking his own hand. Daniel stares at him with bleary eyes and manages a groan. He fumbles for Rack's own cock and finds it pushed eagerly, fat and swollen, into his hand. He's clumsy, but he can still squeeze and play with his fingers and push back the foreskin to swipe up his own finger-full taste of pre-come.

"Oh, yeah," Rack purrs. "I'm feelin' all better now. See?"

* * *

Later in the morning, Daniel's hung a "Closed" sign on the shop door and mentally consigned to hell any customers who come by before ten. There's no way he could get out there and draw anything like a straight line the way he's still trembling after his wake-up fuck.

Instead, he's drawn a bath full of steaming water, added cedar-scented oil, and gotten in. Just as he's half-hoped, Rack passes by the bathroom, gloriously nude and unashamed, stops and poses with hands on his hips and dick against his thigh. His grin is Lucifer's own, selling apples in the Garden. "Gonna be a selfish bastard, then?" he purrs. "If I recall, that bath's big enough for two."

And even though the point was coming down *off* a sexual high, there's no way he's going to say no to this. Daniel scoots back until his shoulders touch the rim of the tub, and gestures between his legs. "There's room, if you want it."

Rack's eyes narrow to feline half-mast. Striding forward, streaked with come and smelling rich, ripe with sex, he leans down to kiss Daniel hard. Their tongues tangle and clash, metal clicking against metal, teeth and tongues and lips colliding in a messy explosion of passion renewed. Down in the water, Daniel's cock stirs back to life, filling once more. When he pulls back, he can see that Rack's dick is standing at attention, too. "Think I do want it," he murmurs. "All of it."

He slips into the hot water, sliding back up against Daniel and nestling his ass against Daniel's fattened cock. "What about you, pet?" he asks mock-innocently, glancing back over his shoulder as meek as a lamb. "Do you want... all of it, too?"

Daniel's only answer is to take off his glasses and fall forward on Rack's back, devouring it with kisses, while with one hand he fumbles for the tube of lubricant on the table beside the tub.

Rack laughs again – but then, when Daniel's hand moves down, he gasps and grabs both sides of the bath with his hands. Pretty soon his knuckles are white and his breath is coming in sharp pants as, surrounded by hot water, slick with water-resistant slipperiness, he's penetrated hard and fast by someone who's turning the tables on game-players with a vengeance...

* * *

Nine o'clock, and they're stumbling into the kitchen, wrapped in robes. Daniel's fits him, and Rack's is far too big on his smaller frame. They bump in the doorway, and Daniel lifts a finger. "I so know what you're going to say, and no more sex," he warns. "You aren't going to tempt me, not with any comments about bananas for breakfast or juicing oranges. No more sex this morning or I won't be able to walk."

Rack's face is the picture of innocence. "Furthest thing from my mind, pet."

"I'd really hate to think about what's the first thing in there, then." Daniel leans down and kisses him tenderly. "You give a hell of a wake-up call."

Rack rumbles and rubs up against him. "Yeah, well, you make bath time much more fun."

"Just call me Rubber Duckie."

"Got all those tests behind us, love, no need for rubbers." Rack leans back against the doorjamb and smirks. "But if you could learn to hold your breath underwater for long enough –"

"No sex!"

"Heaven forbid!" Rack raises his hands in all innocence. Then he smirks. "Least not until you've had your Wheaties. Got to keep your strength up and all that, don't you?"

"You're impossible."

"No, I'm easy. But only when it comes to you, got that?" Rack twines around him, shoving his hands inside the front parting of Daniel's robe to circle his waist, bare beneath. "You're the only one I fuck, the only one I suck, the only one I eat and the only one I love."

"How about the only one you kiss?" Daniel murmurs, leaning closer.

"That too. These lips?" Rack puckers them in a fake moue. "All yours."

"Better be."

Their mouths meet in another kiss that's gentle, almost sweet. Then Daniel swats Rack lightly on the ass. "Get moving. You're just out of a sickbed, I've fucked you twice more this morning than any kind of common sense allows, and you need breakfast. Something that's not pure homemade protein. OK?"

Rack grins and licks at his chin. "I'll be good. But you'll make it up to me later, you will."

"I'm pretty sure of that." Daniel rubs his head against Rack's, and moves forward. Reluctantly.

They amble around his kitchen, Rack as familiar in there as he is by now. Coffee's set to brewing, bacon and eggs passed out from the fridge, and set to sizzling in separate skillets. Bread into the toaster while Rack slips outside for a quick smoke. Back inside to two steaming plates, piled high with high-fat, to-hell-with-cholesterol food, the kind they can really tear into.

Rack eats as if he's starving, and he might well be. He loves nibbling when he's well, and he's just had regular meals forced down him for the past few days. Daniel guesses he must keep the weight off by all that hyperactive bouncing around he does. That, and the Olympic-freestyle fucking they indulge in.

It's peaceful, at first. Then Daniel feels bare toes start to stroke their way up his calf. He nearly chokes laughing on a forkful of scrambled eggs, but he can tell from the shit-eating grin on Rack's face that was just what he'd been hoping for. "Stop it!"

Out comes the lip, sunlight glittering on the bead. "Make me."

"Okay, I will." Daniel lays down his fork, reaches across the table, and takes Rack's hand in his. He strokes it lovingly, memorizing once again the feel of these slim, talented fingers. "It's Sunday. Your shop's closed. While it's quiet, I want you to take me in there and do another piece on me. That map, on my back, like you were talking about."

"Oi!" Rack drops a sliver of bacon. "You sure about that?"

"Oh, yeah. But I want you to make it a map of what we've done. From Fuckland to Rimmstead. Dotted lines, water serpents, and 'here there be fisters'."

Rack howls. "You're not serious!"

"Dead serious."

Slowly, that fox-like face settles into wonder. "You'd let me do that to you?"

"I just said so, didn't I? I want that on me. A forever reminder of where we've been and where we're going. Okay?"

Rack nods, slowly, his face full of wonder. Daniel grins and rubs the back of his hand with his thumb. "Now what's that look for?"

"Nothin'," Rack says slowly. "Just... surprised, that's all."

"You've already got your mark on me." Daniel leans back to show off the tip of the tattooed spike pointing toward his cock. "Now I want more. If my shirt's ever off, I want the world to know I belong to you. Going and coming."

Slowly, Rack nods. "Oh, yeah." His eyes start to gleam. "Know just how I'll do it, too. We've a copy of an old map at the store, and I can use that as a guide, and –"

"Then we'll come home, I'll lie on my stomach, and –"

"And I'll fuck the coming and the going out of you," Rack breathes. "God almighty, I can't wait to dive into you with that to look at."

"Oh, yeah." Daniel raises one finger. "One more thing, Rack. Listen to me carefully, okay? We talked about one more thing when we said you wanted to put a map on me."

A moment's puzzlement, then Rack's forehead is clearing. "The tour, yeah. But I'm not going. Six weeks without you? I'm not that daft."

"Uh-uh. You are going."

"I'm not leaving you –"

"No," Daniel interrupts. "You're not."

He leans over and picks up an envelope from the kitchen counter. Amazing what one phone call and faxing a few credentials can accomplish. He passes it over to Rack, who gapes at the recognizable letterhead. "A tattoo tour can always use a carpenter," he says gently. "I'm going with you. You're going to have your moment in the sun, Rack. And I'll be right there with you."

And for once – just once – Daniel can tell that Rack can't think of anything to say. Nothing at all.

But the smile on his face speaks a thousand volumes.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It's a good life. No, fuck that, it's a *great* life that he has now. Working all day long with fragrant wood, cutting and shaping and trimming, nailing and screwing, making beautiful things for people who appreciate them – and even better, pay him for the privilege. Then at five, sweeping up the fragrant twisty curls of wood shavings and sawdust, and dreaming about what the night's going to hold.

When he's done, a walk through the dusk to his car, and a short ride over to the noisy, buzzing tattoo parlor. There, no matter what else he's doing, Rack stops right away to burst out of the booth and give him a kiss that's always somehow a little better than the one he got the day before. He always tastes of cigarettes and metal, pure Rack, and Daniel gives as good as he gets. Deep down, he gets a kick out of the whoops and hollers that greet their little show, and he doesn't even blush any more.

A few hours of sitting around, relaxing with a can of soda (no alcohol downstairs, or Rack will kick his ass publicly as he kisses his lips) or three and chatting to nervous first-timers or jaded, multi-colored pros, or even the other artists themselves when they have a break. He likes Rufus, tall and ebony, with major skill for that "picky, eye-crossing dainty shit" Celtic and tribal artwork Rack hates doing. Mei-Li, who'll tattoo the nastiest things you ever saw – women with legs spread wide, men grasping full dicks in their hands – and crack jokes all the while. He loves the handmade (by his hands) "Don't Bitch" sign, dangling prominently in her booth.

There's Toby, squeaky-rabbit shy but perfection with colors and shadings. And Joey, who is – gotta admit it – an asshole, but damn talented with a punch.

And his favorite, sweet, shy Amber who's got a gift for nasty limericks and the most delicate hand you ever saw at applying a homemade henna that leaves a rich, brown stain which lasts for weeks. Sometimes she's there, sometimes she makes house calls to women who can't go to a place like Rack's. Always does Daniel's palms for free. She's the best. They're all the best. Rack picked them out for that reason.

Just the way Rack picked him out, he likes to murmur just before going down on Daniel's dripping cock. "Think I want second-rate? Nothing better than this dick, lovely. Nothing tastes finer, smells sweeter, fills my mouth just right." He'll flicker his tongue at the PA. "And all mine, to play with exactly like I want to. You're my best."

Yeah, he's gotten to where he loves those hours. Rack's never still, always has a customer of his own waiting, but he never fails to ask if Daniel can come in and watch. They talk, keeping it mostly clean unless it's an old pro who gets a kick out of the dirty-mouthing, or he just sits and watches art flow from his lover's fingertips. Changes CDs for him and is content. Otherwise, he sits and shoots the shit with whoever's not busy.

Then when the night's over, and Daniel's helped swab the place down, Rack's still not worn out – he's good for hours, dragging Daniel upstairs to burn off some of that energy they've both built up with the waiting and the wanting. Sucking, fucking, frothing, humping, anything they feel like; it's all good. Never stopping until they collapse from exhaustion.

Daniel's turned pro at getting by without much sleep. He might actually be used to it by now. Good thing, too. He wouldn't sacrifice one minute that he crams into his days.

And he's used to the way his days go, now. You can't call them routine, because anything could happen within the divisions. Always something new going on.

But certain things... they don't change.

Like Rack, leaving the parlor in the middle of his working day. But just as he's getting out his broom to sweep, Daniel hears the familiar roar of Rack's classic-but-a-junker Harley roaring up outside his shop. He stops to stare out the window. This can't be good.

Sure enough, it's got all the signs of a Very Bad Thing – Rack's twitched off his helmet and lit up a cigarette the second his legs swing off the bike, and he's stomping – not prowling, or slinking – his way up to Daniel's door.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Fuck, he forgot his key? Something's definitely wrong. Daniel drops the broom and runs to open the door wide, to let Rack rush in – only he doesn't. He's kicking hard at the gravel, eyes lowered, dark and angry. Fear comes pouring into Daniel instead. Is this the end? Did he do something – say something – some kind of rumor come –

"Rack?" He hesitantly reaches for that narrow shoulder, and finds it vibrating with tension. "Hey, you, what's wrong?"

Rack barks out a bitter laugh. "Nothing." And that's so obviously a lie that neither of them challenges it. "Get your spare helmet. Coming with me, you are."

"Where –"

"The shop. Now, if you can spare the time." *Kick!* at the gravel. Glare.

Daniel raises his hands. "I'm coming. Just – give me a second to get it –"

"Hurry the fuck up, then!"

Daniel spares a glance for his messy workshop. It'll be okay, he'll just sacrifice a little more sleep to clean the floor in the morning. He guesses. He's at the hall closet and pulling out his helmet in a blink, rushing back to Rack with keys in hand. And he can't help asking one more time: "Rack, what's going on?"

"You and me, that's what's going on. And we're headin' back to the shop. Now. Got it?"

"I got it." Daniel straps on the helmet. Rack inhales and exhales three times during the minute it takes him to get the thing straight, nervous-and-angry plumes of smoke that billow around the both of them.

Rack doesn't say anything as Daniel locks up, just gives him a once-over, flings his cigarette down and stomps it under one boot, then turns and heads back for the bike. Daniel runs after him, swinging a leg over as Rack revs up the motor. "I haven't done anything –"

"Shut up, already!" Rack shouts. And he could get mad at that, he really could, except Daniel's ears are so sharp from years of listening over loud machinery that he can hear the tremble of tears in his lover's voice. "Nothin' you did. But there's no time to waste. So fucking hold on tight, yeah?"

And he does. Grabs on, harder than he needs to, trying to give some kind of reassurance – for what, he still doesn't know - and feels Rack's chest heave once before Rack's ramming down on the gas and they're out of there, spraying gravel everywhere.

Riding with Rack under normal circumstances is taking your life into your hands. He's a reckless driver, pushing chance to the limit, and being on the back of that bike always scares Daniel shitless. But today, before long, he's glad he's got a death grip on Rack. They tear through back roads and even alleys, taking the short shortcut to the parlor, dodging trash bins and swerving through tightly packed rush-hour traffic. The honking of frightened or indignant horns is like a chorus that follows them until they screech to a stop in front of the parlor.

Just like before, Rack's off the bike almost before it stops, jerking at Daniel's arms. "Come on. Inside."

Daniel half-expects to see the place trashed, maybe by some hate-mongers, or to see another kind of carpentry disaster – like one of the booths caved in – but no, everything's as normal as it can be. Except that when Rack stomps in, every employee in sight gives him a strange and nervous glance, and the others peek out quickly before twitching their curtains back. Shelly, at the register, even flinches when they rush past, heading straight into Rack's booth.

And it's there that Daniel makes him stop. He can handle the moody, mouthed punk. He loves him. But if he's freaking out his staff, something's gotta be done. "Stop," he says, deliberately harsh, grabbing Rack by the stiff forearms. "Tell me what's going on, or I'm not moving except to get out of here. And I fucking mean it, Rack."

His lover looks up at him. He's not crying, but there's a suspicious redness to his eyes that says, maybe he has been. He jitters nervously on both feet, like a little kid, and Daniel knows that all he wants is to be held. Well, the hell with that. He's not getting any hugs until he's spilled... aw, fuck it. With both arms, he grabs onto Rack and strong-arm bearhugs him, refusing to let go. "Baby, what happened?" he whispers. "You can tell me."

Rack's trembling in his arms. "Can't," is all he mumbles. "Just can't. Not yet."

"Will you?"

Shivery nod. "Yeah. Soon's we get this done. Promise. Just – hold on for a minute more, yeah? Let me get under control."

So Daniel hugs him, until eventually he feels Rack's arms creep around his back and hang on tight. They rock to the music of buzzing tattoo guns and low customer chatter until a little, some, enough of the tension leaves him.

Rack drops his arms and backs away. Not quite needing to swipe at his eyes. "Need you to do something for me, pet," he says quietly. "Promise?"

Which could be a bad idea. A really, really bad idea. But he can't deny Rack anything. He never could. Hands still lingering on those lean arms, he rubs them with his thumbs and nods. "Promise."

"Finish inking me?" Rack's eyes are pitiful, pleading, and God does it hurt to see his proud, braggadocious partner look like that. "The 'X' over my lower gut. Right above the cock. I want you to color that in. Fresh and new for me, tonight."

It's a bad idea. Daniel flexes his hands helplessly. Rack's been teaching him, and he hasn't been doing bad – the only slightly-wobbly 'X' is his own creation – but they did that on a weekend, when he hadn't been using his hands all day on hard, unyielding wood. If he tries to do anything tonight... "Rack, my fingers –"

"I know. God, I know." Rack snatches them up and kisses each weary digit fervently. "But I swear to you, I need this. Don't care if it ends up looking like a kid scribbled in a comic book. Just fill it in. Finish making your mark on me. So I'm yours all the way. Right?"

As Rack's speaking, he's squirming his way up onto the chair. Undoing the buttons on his jeans and jerking up his T-shirt so that the 'X' is in plain view, black outlines of a rococo letter. Daniel can see just the tip of Rack's cock, but it's soft, limp flesh tucked to the left.

Daniel resists the urge to touch it, run his finger across it, make Rack feel better that way. But it's not what Rack wants right now – for once. Rack's desperate to get this ink done.

Daniel knows better. But he promised. "Okay. Let me get a cup of coffee, and I'll be back."

Rack, stiff as a ramrod, nods. "I'll be waiting."

"It won't take me a second," Daniel promises, ducking back out the curtain. When he emerges, there's nothing but customers – all a little wide-eyed and nervous, like they can sense the tension – and Amber, alone at her desk. Even the desk clerk, Shelly, has stepped out for a sec.

Amber reaches for his hand as he goes past. "You'll do it?" Her eyes are huge. "What he wants, I mean."

Daniel nods, running a hand through his shaggy hair. "But why?" he whispers. "What happened?"

She shakes her head. "It's – it's not my story to tell. Maybe he will. But this is important, okay?" Her

hair falls in front of her eyes, a fall of golden cornsilk. "Just do it for him."

"I will." Daniel's getting more worried by the minute. Coffee – again, probably a bad idea, but – "Any caffeine left?"

"I made a fresh pot," Amber nods. "Really strong, the way you like it. I hoped you'd..." her voice trails off. "Be good to him, okay?"

"I always am."

"I know." Her hand squeezes his once more, then lets go. "That's why I trust you. Hurry up."

The coffee's so hot that it burns his hand through the paper cup, and so strong that the scent of it nearly knocks him over. But it tastes good, strong as the kick of a nail gun, and it brings him a little closer back to reality and sanity. Amber's working on her next customer when he passes back by her, so no more excuses to stop and ask anything. The place is jumping, every artist busy. Shelly slips back behind the register, but won't look his way. Her eyes *are* red – she's been bawling, he can tell. But no time to ask. Rack wants him to do this? He'll do it.

He shoves his way back through the curtain and finds Rack exactly the way he left him, stiff as a board on the chair. Another deep swallow of coffee, and he's doing what he's only done upstairs in the privacy of Rack's apartment – rubbing those arms and legs, gentling them down in a soothing massage. "Okay, Mister Pain," he croons. "I'll do this for you, but you gotta relax. Otherwise it's gonna hurt like more hell than even you can take."

Rack's hand flies up to catch his. "Don't know if I can."

"You can." Daniel keeps rubbing, rubbing, rubbing. "Relax for me, baby. Just take deep breaths and go slack. I'm here for you. I'm gonna color you in and make you all mine. But you have to relax."

Slowly, bit-by-bit, Rack's body goes from rubber band taut to loose and slack. Daniel bends and kisses him – Rack's lips are trembling – and makes the kiss as deep and hungry as he can. That does the trick. By the time Daniel pulls away, Rack's limp as a noodle, gazing back at Daniel with hungry eyes. "Go on," Rack breathes. "Do it for me."

"And you'll do me later?" Daniel jokes, turning on the sink and washing his arms up to the elbow before snapping on a pair of rubber gloves.

"God, yes. Do you like you've never been done yet." Rack's eyes are pleading. "No. No, I want you to do me. Make me yours again."

Daniel tries to make a joke out of it as he snaps open sterile containers and readies a tattoo gun. "Push so deep up inside you you'll taste me in the back of your throat? Come in your mouth until I'm all you can taste?"

It doesn't sound half as sexy as when Rack talks like that, but his lover's eyes turn almost fever-bright. "Fuck, yes. Please. Do that for me."

"Then stay cool for me, and we'll do that. Every bit of it." Daniel hesitates over the inks. "What color?"

Rack doesn't blink. "Red. That good, crimson-blood-red I showed you how to mix."

Daniel readies that, then bends over Rack's belly. He strokes down his chest, reassuring and comforting. "You know this is going to hurt."

"I know." Rack tosses his head. "But I need it. Please?"

"Sssh, sssh," Daniel murmurs. "Ready?"

"God, yes."

"Okay." It always makes him flinch to see the start of a tattoo, that inevitable wince that even the most inked-up of people can't help but give when the needle hits the flesh, but he's there to stroke Rack's arm. And after that, Rack's so used to the pain that he just quivers a little, even though they both know how much a tattoo there hurts.

Daniel's careful. He does it like Rack and Toby showed him how, filling in the 'X' with that rich, super-saturated red color, working his way through graduated lines that blend to fill. It stands out like a fresh brand, raw and bright and beautiful in an ugly way. Halfway through, Rack's hand reaches out and fists onto Daniel's knee. He lets him, knowing how much it's needed.

When he takes a break for more ink, Rack draws in a deep, shuddery breath. "You need a smoke?" Daniel's quick to ask. "Need to step outside?"

Rack shakes his head. "No. Want this finished. Just... talk to me, yeah? Tell me things."

More ink, and he's back at it. Gentle as he can be. So willing to open up if only Rack will. "What kind of things?"

"Tell me about..." deep breath... "your family. Know you've got one; I've seen the pics in your den."

Daniel nods, careful not to let his hand shake. He's starting to get an idea. "You want to know what they think about me being gay?"

Shaking breath. "Yeah. Tell me. You never have."

"It never came up."

"It's bloody coming up now." Those eyes fix on him, staring hard. "Tell me."

"Well," Daniel says, keeping his hand steady, "Dad doesn't care. He's a live-behind-his-newspaper kind of guy. As long as I don't start wearing tiaras when I come home for visits, he's fine. I think his big response was turning to the financial pages and mumbling something about at least my brother giving him grandchildren."

"Your brother? Your mum?" The hand tightens.

"My brother was the first to know. We shared a room. We both had our own stacks of dirty magazines under our mattresses. He got bored with his one day and decided to see if I had anything different." Daniel chuckles. "He got a surprise. And I got a hell of a lot of teasing. He's never been angry. He just says that now when people want to know who his better-looking older brother is, that he can tell them I'm gay and go after the hotties himself."

Another pause; more ink. "Mom? She's mostly nervous I'll catch something. And there were a few tears when I told her. But she's OK now. She'll never be caught at a P-FLAG anything, but she's there for me. Remember when I sent her that picture of you and me? My brother said she laughed herself sick and said it looked like I had my hands full."

The tattoo's almost done. "Yeah," Rack says, voice shaking. "Your family's a bit of all right."

"And yours isn't, is it?" Daniel says quietly. "Something happened with them, didn't it?"

Rack turns his head to the side. Daniel reaches up with one gloved hand and turns it back. "Uh-uh. I don't hold anything back from you. That's the way it's always been. And you? Most honest guy on the planet. So talk to me, Rack. What happened?"

The blue, blue eyes are bright with tears now. "She came in this afternoon," he says hoarsely, after a moment. "No, didn't come in, fucking sneaked in, so I didn't see her at first. I was leanin' over the counter with Rufus, talking about how it felt to have a lover that satisfied your every need. And then I felt those sour eyes just borin' a hole into me, so I looked back and there she way. My sis."

His hand tightens on Daniel's knee. "We used to be close, you know? Real close." He chokes a laugh. "Even if she was a silly bint. Always known what I was, me. She didn't have a clue, even though I did her makeup and hair for her before she went on dates. Then one day she found out, and fucking swear to God, it's like I was poison, then. Went straight to Mum and Da and told them, and you've never heard such a screaming fight in your life. Kicked me out. Told me never to come back again. Said I wasn't their son anymore."

Rack's jaw tightens. "I told myself, fuck them! Didn't need them. I got together what I'd saved, sold my bike, and come over here. Worked hard, got my green card. Worked harder and put away every penny I could that didn't go on ink or metal, to prove to myself I was who I was. Like you said. Mouthy. Punk. Smoker. Devil-may-fuckin'-care. And I got this place. And I got you. And it was OK, you know? Didn't need them."

He nods toward the corner of the booth. Daniel's eyes flicker over, and he sees a crumpled piece of paper laying there. "Bitch couldn't even send it through a lawyer. Had to fly over here, track me down, and hand it to me in person."

The tattoo's done. Daniel smears antibiotic gel over it so that it shines. He takes Rack's hand in his, squeezing. "They disowned me, Dan," Rack whispers. "For good and all. Legal and everything. Got no family any more. No one to belong to but you."

Daniel looks at Rack's face, then looks down at the bright 'X'. And he understands. "Rack..."

Rack growls softly, shaking his head. Refusing to cry. "See it now? Why I needed this? Got to belong to someone, love. Got to know I belong to you."

Daniel stands, leans over Rack, and kisses him without warning, delving deep as he can with his tongue, soothing him with broad swipes, lapping at his cheeks and nipping at his lips. "You are mine," he parts just long enough to say. "You didn't need this to prove it."

"Fuck you. I did." He catches Daniel's hand. "Know you've got to bandage it, but not yet. Let me see it good first." He scrabbles for the mirror. "Show me?"

Silently, Daniel passes over the hand mirror. Rack stares at the tattoo's reflection for a long moment, until the smallest smile curves up the corner of his lips. "S' a good job," is all he says.

"I learned from the best." Daniel brushes his lips a second time. "Let me bandage it now, OK?"

"OK," Rack whispers. "And even if it's hidden, I belong to you, right?"

"Always. Forever and always." A third kiss. "If I had rings..."

Ah, that gets a laugh. "Hey, you think I'm kidding," Daniel teases. He smooths Rack's gel-crunchy hair. "Maybe later, if you feel like it. I'm serious."

More tightening of the jaw, and a desperate grip now on Daniel's leg. "Fuck me first? Let me feel you deep inside. Claiming me."

Daniel shakes his head. "I don't want to hurt you with a fresh tattoo. And you know my hands would wander. I have a better idea." He flicks a finger at Rack's nose. "Think you can be quiet?"

Rack flickers a grin at him. "No."

"Good. 'Cause if for some reason that bitch comes back, I want her to hear everything." Daniel presses down the last square of tape over Rack's bandage, and then stands to go to the flaps on the booth. They've got fasteners on them, to keep them good and shut, and he clicks those in place. "Lay still for me, baby. Just like you are."

Rack's breath quickens. "You gonna —"

"I'm gonna." Daniel discards the gloves, so that he can touch Rack skin to skin, and sits at the foot of the table. Slowly, he scoots Rack's jeans down, down to his knees. "Open your legs for me. Open wide."

They fall apart for him. Rack's already fisting the chair arms, and his breath is coming in quick pants. His cock's half-filled with blood, rising and hardening. "Now that's what I like to see." Daniel puts his warm hands on Rack's hips, dips his head, and licks a broad stripe up the length of that cock. He can feel it grow under his tongue, especially when he stops to mouth the dolphin piercing; he can taste pre-come start to dribble out when he sucks and nibbles at the PA.

"Gonna blow you," he says softly, imitating Rack as best he can. "Right here, with a shop full of customers and everyone else. Because you belong to me, and I belong to you, and we're all we need. Got it?"

Rack moans. Daniel slides his mouth down over that fat cock, slowly, sweetly, sucking in so that his cheeks hollow out, then pulls back the same way. He's careful to hold that dripping cock well free of the bandage, and the little bit of pain is turning Rack on like a firecracker.

He ignores his own dick, begging for attention. There's time for that later. Right now, this is all about Rack. Pierced, punk, smoking, mouthy Rack who's turned his life upside down and made it better than he could have ever dreamed. Right now, all he wants is the taste of come and metal and his lover, dragged over an eager tongue or slipped as far down his throat as he can. Daniel kneads at his hips as Rack grips the chair arms, shushing him every time he groans just a little too loudly. Murmuring, when his mouth is free for a second or two: "Mine, mine, mine..."

It doesn't take long; Rack's too worked up for this to be slow and sweet. He gives a throaty half-yell that's audible even over the music blasting from other booths, thrusts up hard with his hips, and empties into Daniel's eagerly nursing mouth. Daniel swallows fast as he can, and bathes Rack's cock until it softens with the last of it.

Sucking him totally clean, he gently lays the spent member down on Rack's thigh. His lover's staring at him, dazed, blue eyes hazy. "And that's just the start," Daniel says quietly. "You're done for the day. So am I. We're going upstairs and I'm going to show you how much you belong to me."

He carefully, carefully does up Rack's jeans, and helps him to a sitting position, then off the chair. They stagger to the curtain, snap it open, and –

Oh, fuck. Oh, God. It's like looking at a female version of Rack, except her face is pruned up into the sourest, ugliest expression. She's scrubbed clean and free of any makeup, and her hair is scraped back into a tight bun. There's papers in her hands.

Rack flinches. Daniel looks at this bitch, and feels nothing but hate. "Get the fuck out of here," he says quietly. "Management has the right to refuse service."

It's nice, the way she flinches at his cursing. "Out," he says. "I don't want to see your face any more. Mail what you've got to mail, but you're gone. Because this is my lover, okay? He's mine. I just sucked him off and I'm going to do it again and again. You don't matter."

And maybe it's the force in his voice, or the rage in his eyes, but she slowly shrinks back while he's speaking. The papers crinkle a little in his hands. And when she turns to glance behind her, she sees a ring of tattooists and customers, standing up behind her. Her mouth works. "You – you –"

"Yeah, me." Daniel tightens his grip. "Him and me. Get – the – fuck – out."

She backs off slowly. "Sinners," she spits. "You're going to hell, both of you."

"Then save me a fucking seat." Daniel advances on her, holding Rack up. "Just leave. Now."

And then his lover makes him prouder than he ever has before. Rack lifts his head, and stares at this person who used to be his sister. "Bye, Lydia," he says quietly. "I won't see you again."

Her mouth opens and shuts like a fish.

"I don't need you," Rack goes on, some of the old fire returning. "I've a new family now, who don't give a shit how I live my life. Don't need Mum or Da, either. Your papers? They're nothing."

He wraps his arm around Daniel. "Go on, then. Mind the door doesn't hit your arse on the way out."

That mouth tightens into a fierce knot again. With a flat hand, she slams more papers down on the counter, turns on her heel, and stalks out.

The silence is deafening.

Rack's arm tightens around Daniel. He glances down at the legal documents, and snorts: "Bitch!" And he sends them flying with a swipe of his hand.

And damned if the whole shop doesn't burst into applause. Even Joey's pounding his hands together. "I'm done down here for the day," Rack announces. "Anyone had an appointment, reschedule at a discount."

He looks up at Daniel. "I'm going upstairs with my honey," he announces, loud as he can. "And if that ceiling starts rocking, don't you dare come knocking, 'cause we're gonna be fucking like madmen."

Another cheer goes up, and Daniel, laughing, can't resist. He bends his face to Rack's, and they share that dusk-time kiss, hot and hard, hungry and real. Better, now, somehow, than it ever has been before.

Claiming. Belonging.

Loving.

And the applause from their audience, their family, only grows all the louder.

CHAPTER NINE

Daniel lays flopped out across his bed, fingertips and toes dangling over the edges. Staring at the ceiling and the fan there, making its lazy circles around... and around... and around...

The cordless phone's not far from one of his hands, where he tossed it on the bed. But he can still hear every second of the conversation in his mind:

"Guess who?"

"Marilyn Monroe?"

"Daniel, don't be a dumbass. It's your favorite cousin. Does that help?"

"Like I said, Marilyn?"

"Daniel!"

"Well, if you trace the bloodlines back, we're all brothers..."

"Daniel, you know who this is. Now say hello respectfully."

"Hey, Luz. How's it going?"

He'd spoken warmly to her. Tiny, blonde, and pert, she really was the favorite of his cousins. Their parents had been neighbors, and they'd grown up together. As it turned out, she'd known Amber's girlfriend Hannah in college. Small world, all the pieces fitting together.

They'd chatted for a few minutes – light, airy, inconsequential things. Then she'd casually mentioned seeing *him*, the last guy Daniel had dated before Rack, at the local pharmacy. She'd been behind him in line. Heard the names of the drugs he'd been picking up. But hey, no worries, because Daniel had tested recently with Rack, and he'd tested safe, right?

"Yes, Mom."

"Don't yes, Mom, me. And good. I know you play it safe. But I've seen Alex around since you two split, and believe me, for a while there he went after anything with a tight behind."

"Hey, just because he dumped me..."

"I still say you should have let me kick his ass for you."

"On behalf of all bottoms everywhere, I must protest. Although sometimes Rack likes for me to top," he'd teased her.

"Ew, Daniel, TMI!"

"Hey," he laughs, "You got yourself into it."

"No, you got yourself out of relationship with a guy who was mad, bad and dangerous to know. I'm glad you're with someone new. So when do we get to meet him?"

Probably soon, since we're all but engaged, Daniel had thought – but didn't say. "When we can all get together," he'd responded mildly. "Tuesday at noon?"

"You know I have yoga. And then tai chi. And Pilates. Pretty much any day at noon you know I'm busy. I think you're trying to give me a hard time, buster."

Oh, God, what Rack could do with a straight line like that. "Sorry, hon," he'd soothed. "Look at your calendar and find a time that works. Me and Rack will try to work around it."

"Woof! Woof!"

"Only if you quit with the name jokes."

"Fine." She'd pouted at him over the air for three seconds before relenting. "I'm glad you're okay, Dan. Talk to you later, 'kay?"

"Kay," he'd said, fingers already moving to the OFF button.

So. Alex had it. The Disease. The one no one ever talked about, because hey, knock wood (and he had plenty in his shop), you don't want to put yourself at risk for it. Okay. Bad for him. Really bad for him. But for Daniel, no problem. He'd been tested at the clinic, with Rack, and they were both negative. Way long enough after he'd been with Alex for that not to be an issue.

Good thing, too. The way he'd been feeling...

After a forty-eight-hour bug the week before, he was still worn out. Kept taking naps, tucked away in the backroom of the parlor or upstairs in Rack's rickety foldout. Or falling asleep in the lounge at his house with Rack on his lap. Granted, Rack was usually rubbing his chest in soft circles once he saw Daniel nodding off, coaxing him into nap-dom, but...

Could it be anemia? He'd been anemic as a kid. That could be it. It couldn't be... that. Because even if Alex had it, Daniel was safe from that source. He was. And he'd used a condom with Rack before finding out they were both negative.

So he should be fine. Maybe he just needed a big steak or two on the menu in the upcoming future. He could tease Rack by showing him the American art and pastime of grilling.

He was just upset about Alex, that was all.

Then the phone rang a second time, and he'd been too lost in thought to catch it. It had rolled over to the answering machine, and...

Daniel shakes his head hard as, in the distance, he hears a familiar sputtering roar. Saturday, but the shop is still open, and Rack a creature of habit no matter how much he protests that. He'll be coming up the drive any second now.

Daniel doesn't move.

Until, that is, he hears a wild whoop of laughter, and a wide, crazy skid in his driveway, plus a spattering of gravel against the house like little bullets. "Goddammit!" he roars. "Rack!"

Thrusting himself from the bed, he boils into the workshop entryway, where Rack's peeling off bits of leather. He glances up with that strike-you-to-the-heart grin, the one where his tongue curls over the tip of his teeth, and Daniel wavers for a second. But no. He's pissed now. There's a five-foot swath of bike skid in his driveway and now it looks like hell.

Rack doesn't get the kiss he was probably expecting. Instead, he gets an earful: "What have I told you about doing that?" Daniel demands, staring past him at the ruined drive. "You get to rake all that back. Besides which, one of these days you're going to fall on your ass with that bike on top of you, or you're going to knock a hole through – shit on a fucking shingle, you did break a window!"

Pushing the speechless Rack back, he runs toward the window over his kitchen sink. There's a chip in the middle, and spiderwebbed cracks radiating outward from it. "Damn it!" Daniel pounds the chopping block with his fist. "Look what you did!"

Rack crunches in, putting one hand up to the damage. "Shit, I'm sorry, Dan," he says penitently. "I'll pay to get that fixed."

"With what? All your profits go right back into the shop. So you drive that ancient motorbike and wear the clothes you bought when you decided punk was the look back in the eighties." Daniel snipes. "Hey, don't—"

Too late; Rack's moved his finger the wrong way and cut the tip on the broken glass. He curses and shoves it under the spigot, turning on the cold water. "Buggering hell—"

"Good job," Daniel says coldly. He doesn't stick around to examine the damage. To find out if it's bad enough that he'll lose out on a night's work, or need stitches, or a ride to the hospital.

"What's put a bug up your arse, then?" he hears Rack demanding, but he doesn't turn around. Instead, he stalks back into the bedroom and flops back across his mattress. Good, cold, comforting mattress.

After a few moments Rack appears, his finger wrapped in a wet paper towel and both hands on his hips. "What's wrong with you?"

Daniel stares at the ceiling. "Absolutely nothing. Trust me."

"That was about as convincin' as a nun swearing on the Black Rosary." Rack strips off the paper towel, examines his finger, shrugs, and bounces onto the bed next to Daniel. "You had a bad day, is that it? Need a bit of slap and tickle to get the spring back in your step?"

"Rack... believe it or not, sometimes that's the last thing I want or need from you," Daniel says. "To be fucked."

Rack blinks. "That's a new one. You weren't singin' that tune last night, as I recall. It was more along the lines of 'harder, deeper, God, fucking yes,'. What's happened?"

Rack springs up to put a knee on either side of Daniel's ribs and sit lightly as a baby bird on his chest. His legs are warm from the sunshine and smell like diesel, antiseptics, and pure Rack. He leans down for a long, nibbling kiss along Daniel's lips that the man can't help but give into after the first moment, mouths and tongues moving together and against each other, tongue studs clattering. Until he finds his arms going up and around Rack's back –

He drops them, and moves his face away, leaving Rack kissing his cheek. "Stop it, Rack. I said, stop!"

"Right, I can do that," Rack moves to bite at his earlobe. "Got something else you'd rather get your lips on?" He thrusts his hips a little closer to Daniel's face. "I could do that too."

Oh, God. The urge just to reach up and unzip and... "No."

"You sure?" Rack pushes just a little more, leans forward a bit, and Daniel can feel the rock-hard bulge under the zipper of those jeans. "Great mid-afternoon snack. High protein. That'll pep you up."

"Rack..."

"Don't tell me, let me guess." Rack lets go of his ear with a *pop* and leans forward on his arms. "No, right?"

Daniel stares at him. "No."

"Shit." Rack slaps the bed and rolls off, groping himself for added insult. "What's wrong with you? And don't tell me bloody 'nothing', 'cause I won't believe it."

Daniel stares at the ceiling. "Rack," he starts slowly, "you're always safe at the shop, aren't you?"

"Are you insane? Go through a dozen bottles a day of disinfectant, we do! Everything in its hospital-safe wrapper. Bio-hazard waste taken away. And speakin' of the shop, we need to get our asses over there. Amber's stayin' after her time special for us today. She's got a fancy to do rings on our fingers. It would be her afternoon off, except she's been waiting for you. She *really* wants to do up those henna rings." Mercurial, forgetting the fight, he flops down on the bed and walks his fingers up Daniel's chest. "Each little piggy, eh?"

"That's toes, Rack."

"Well, she'll probably start in on the feet before she's satisfied she's got it right. And she's got a surprise she's been going on all day about, but won't let me spoil it. So get your riding kit on, and let's –"

"I'm not going."

Rack rears up. "You're not what, now?"

"Not going." Daniel turns on his side.

From behind him, silence.

Then, he feels a hand slipping up the length of his backbone, rubbing at his shoulders. "Dan, love, you've got me scared now. Come on, then. Did someone die?"

"No."

"Some sort of accident happen?"

"You could say that."

"God, Dan, would you open your mouth already? I've fit my cock into it enough to know it'll stretch wide enough for words." Rack slaps his back lightly. The hand works its way around front, sliding up to his nipple and twisting gently. "Come on, then. It can't be bad as all that."

Daniel hisses softly as Rack tweaks his nipple ring, tugging in just the way Rack's learned turns him on like lighting a fire. His cock begins to fill despite himself, and he's glad he's on his side, so Rack can't see.

But Rack has two hands and the other one's sliding down to cup him. "There, you see?" he murmurs, lightly biting the curve of Daniel's neck. "Part of you's not so brassed off at me as all that. Is it the stupid window, Dan? I swear I'll buy you another. Don't take on about that."

Daniel shakes his head. "It's not about the window. Would you – would you just go back to your stupid tattoo parlor and leave me alone?"

He feels Rack's temper rise. "My what parlor?"

"Your tattoo parlor, your shop," Daniel enunciates. "The shop that apparently takes up every hour of every day of your life that you're not with me or asleep. Go back and draw some more Tasmanian cartoon characters on fat middle-aged men who think they're tough."

"Not fucking likely."

"And not likely to fuck, so give it up." Daniel jerks out of Rack's hands and tucks in tighter on

himself. "Just go away, would you?"

"No." Rack sits up, and Daniel can hear him arranging himself. "Not until you spill. What's wrong?"

Daniel's temper reaches its boiling point and he snaps quietly, deadly. "You really want to know? Fine. Here."

He reaches out and hits the REPLAY button on his answering machine. A warm, sweet voice fills the room. *"-fternoon, Mr. Harris. This is Elizabeth from the free clinic. We need for you to give us a call as soon as possible, okay? Darn! I'm so sorry we weren't able to catch you. The clinic's closing in about two minutes here, but we'll be open at eight on Monday. Give us a call then, if you will?"*

CLICK

Daniel turns his head back just enough to see Rack blinking, dumbfounded. "The free clinic?"

"Yeah. Remember I went in for that virus last week, and they drew blood?"

"I do. Are you saying – Dan, no, come on, we were both –"

"We were," Daniel says coldly. He glares at Rack. "And I've been faithful. And there's no way to catch it when you're doing your tattoo work."

"Daniel –"

"Rack, shut up!" Daniel rolls back into a ball. "Just tell me one thing, and then get out."

"Daniel..."

"Rack, when did you cheat on me? Why?"

CHAPTER TEN

That back turned to him might as well be a wall. Hard as granite, just as able to love and give. And from behind it, his Daniel's accused him of cheating.

Rack sits, stunned, on the bedclothes they've fucked in so many times. Nah. He heard that wrong. Couldn't be. "Say that again, Daniel."

Daniel's shoulders twitch. "Why did you cheat on me?" His voice is muffled. "Who with? Did you just sneak them upstairs for a nooner, or what?"

"Dan, love, I never –"

"Stop lying to me! God. I thought I could trust you." Daniel turns over, and Rack can see that his face is pale as milk. He jabs a finger at the answering machine. "But there's your proof that I can't. Shouldn't have."

Rack's still trying to keep up. "Dan, a call like that... could be anything, from you forgot to pay up or they maybe want to make sure you're better. Doesn't have to mean you have... that, for them to call."

"Don't I? It's been just over a week. That's how long it takes at the free clinic if they don't rush it. And they did panels on everything, because I was so sick. They called me once about antibiotics, and they said so in the message. But she wouldn't say in this message. They don't, if it's bad news. They bring you in so you can talk face to face." Daniel's fingers have been gripping the bedspread until now, his knuckles are bone-white. "What else do they call gay men about?"

Rack can't help it; he rolls his eyes. Daniel looks desperately wounded and rolls back in on himself. Rack puts a hand on his shoulder, shaking it lightly. "Lots of things, love! Could be you've got hepatitis. Or mono. Or anemia; you've had that before and you're right pale lately."

"Or HIV." Daniel's voice is flat.

"And you've just decided that's what it is. And that I –" Rack can't make himself say it, not rightly, because he still can't believe Daniel would think of it. "Wasn't faithful to you. Just made up your mind, have you?"

Daniel shudders. "I don't come into contact with anything more dangerous than cedar – and you. You're the only man I ever went bareback with," he whispers. "Because I trusted you that much."

"So let's see it unfoldin' from your point of view, which is apparently the only right one in this

room." Rack can feel it growing within him, now, a spark from that pit of anger he's usually only directed at his family. Never gotten mad at his Daniel, he hasn't – he's had no reason. "I lure you in, and lucky us, we test negative, so I can have my wicked way with you. Oh, not that you minded."

His voice turns silken. "I can remember everything you say in bed. The way you sound when you call my name. The way your breath pitches when you're ready to come. I know what you like, and how to keep you wanting it. But then, that's me, isn't it? The Big Bad Wolf. Riding you bareback all I like, and slipping bits of Twinkie upstairs during my lunch break. Daniel, you're being a damned fool."

Daniel shudders. And says nothing.

"So you're convinced. I've cheated on you. Well!" Rack slaps the mattress. "What d'you want, a list of names? Dates? Times? Mind you, it'll all be bull-shit lies because I have never, not ever, not once cheated on you, but that's all you care to hear just now!"

"Stop it," Daniel whispers. "Just stop it, Rack."

"Goddamnit!" Rack jumps up on his hands and knees. Predatory as a jungle cat. "What's it gonna take for you to believe me? You want me to go get tested? I'll do that, right now. At the hospital. Proper-like. I'll pay what it takes to get the results right away. Show you I'm not –"

Daniel turns back away and curls in on himself. "Go away. Just go away."

"Oh, you're bloody right I'll go away. But if you pitch me out now –"

"Don't bother coming back," says that toneless voice. "It's over."

Fucking hell. That's like a sledge straight to the chest, and it sucks all the air out of him. Rack sits back hard. He hadn't meant anything like – "You're – you're not serious, Dan."

"Go. Away."

"No. No, love, no." He runs his hand down the length of one rigid arm. "Nah, love, we've got plans, us. Gonna get committed. Have rings hennaed on and all. Go on that tattoo tour and see the world. Gonna move in here and get a car like you're always ragging me to do and –"

"Not any more." Daniel won't look at him, and he won't respond to the touch. "That's done with."

"God, Daniel, no." Rack's pleading now, rubbing his arm as if it were a lifeline – but it's cold, and unresponsive.

But he's not shrugged off, nor pushed away, and the limb relaxes under his anxious handling. Daniel's fist uncurls, and his breathing eases out a little. Rack himself dares to breathe again. Maybe he'll come 'round. Get off this stupid idea that –

Finally, Daniel stirs. "Rack?" he whispers.

"Yeah, love." Rack leans in, placing a kiss on his beloved boy's shoulder. "What is it? Anything."

"Fuck off."

He rears away. The spark of anger flares into full life, and he feels colder than an icicle inside. Just as fragile, too. Could be snapped between two fingers. "Right. But I'm using the phone first."

He reaches over Daniel, grabbing it before the stiff body can protest, can turn this into a wrestling match, and thumbs in the speed-dial automatically, rather than looking at the numbers. "Amber?" He's surprised at how normal his voice sounds. "Love, might as well go home. Dan's not feeling well. He won't be by. An' you don't want to keep your lady waiting, do you?"

He pauses. Her gentle concern could break him, but he won't let it. Breathing in and out, he shakes his head. "Nah! I'm fine. Probably won't be back for another hour or so. I've some things to take care of. Just let Mei-Li and Rufus know. They can divide the appointments between themselves. Full commission on whatever they do. Right, love. Ta."

The phone clicks off, and he tosses it at Daniel's stiff back. Stands, uneasily. "You do know what you're throwin' away, here?" he says quietly. "These past few months mean that little to you?"

No answer.

Fine. Rack turns on his heel and stalks out of the bedroom, finding his leather gloves and his motorcycle helmet and his jacket, shrugging them all on before slamming out of the house. He doesn't bother to lock it behind him.

His bike's lying on its side in the drive, in the middle of the ruined swath of gravel. He stares at it, eyes unreadable, before righting the old faithful and swinging a leg over. She fires up just as he likes for her to, and he's off with a roar of engines and screech of tires that's only a little louder than need be.

He can't forget that on this trip round, he was supposed to have a pair of warm arms around his waist. Maybe some hands wandering inside his jacket, up to tug on his nipple hoops or down, stroking over his cock. It's still daylight, but times past when Dan's felt playful enough he's been willing to tease, and tempt the fates by toying with the idea of a hand job while they ride...

God. It's not been half an hour since he went inside the house, thinking things were all right. That he'd be met by a good, bone-melting kiss, that maybe they'd have time for a quick suck job – and his mouth had been watering to taste his boy – or at least some groping and more kissing before they headed back.

His hands are scrubbed clean. He'd already shaved the pale, wisp-fine hairs off wherever they grew, so the surface was perfect for Amber to work on. He'd been going to shave Dan's burlier hands himself. Make it as smooth and sweet a work surface as you ever saw. Then show him, later, what hairless hands felt like working at a cock or deeper still between their legs.

Those hands burn inside his gloves.

His head's still spinning. He takes curves, makes turns, waits at the light like a good little boy, but it's all autopilot. Daniel... kicked him out. Dan thinks he's cheated.

Fuck. After all he's been through, with Wes that dumped him, and all they've done together – the shop, the tats, the body work... how the hell? Why would Dan think he'd cheat? Hasn't he been all Rack's world since the moment they met? Every day he's worked, he's done it knowing that he'd see Dan soon. Every night he's looked forward to like a thirsty man in the desert. That messy-haired carpenter, with his gormless glasses, has been all he can think of.

Sure, there's been plenty of young, hot arse trotting itself in and out of the parlor. Knowing him to be gay. Twitching what they had while glancing through the flash on the walls, or wiggling under his needle. And he'd not been tempted. Not once. None of them compared to Dan, with the smell of fresh wood and sawdust and musk, strong as an ox and gentle as a kitten. So he'd thought. Now he knows Dan's stubborn as a pig and bloody-minded as a maiden aunt, too.

To think that call meant... it could be anything. Didn't have to be HIV. And if it was, if he'd gotten it somehow – no, fuck no, Dan wouldn't have cheated on him – surely not – he'd have stayed. They'd have figured out some way to work it. He'd have rung the git up every hour to make sure he took his fucking pills.

That's another thought. It can't be what Dan thinks it is, and he knows it. Rack knows he's clean. That's his livelihood. He's tested every month, just to be sure. And he's been with nobody since Daniel, with his last test just a week old.

Why the fuck's Daniel so quick to jump to conclusions like that? Doesn't he trust him at all?

Rack accelerates, not thinking, until he zooms under a red light and has a narrow miss with a truck. Gasping for breath, he pulls over to the shoulder and jerks off his helmet, sucking for air.

"You crazy son-of-a-bitch!" the truck driver yells out his window, righting his vehicle from its swerve.

Rack stares after him, thinking. Crazy son-of-a-bitch. That's right. Too right. That's how he's made his way in this country. Head down like a bull, scattering people before him when they stood in his way. Making them see it like he does. Forcing them to see the truth.

Right. He jams the helmet back on his head and executes an illegal turn-around in the lanes, heading back the way he came. He's going back to Daniel's, and he's going to beat some sense into that tousled head one way or the other.

No matter what it takes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Daniel lays on his bed, listening to the sounds of Rack hauling his bike upright on the gravel and kicking it into gear. Familiar... and unfamiliar, because of the abruptness. He's angry, Daniel knows that. He must feel betrayed. Hurt. Cut to the bone.

Good.

He shudders, hard, in the way a child will when he's too worn out to cry any more, and huddles himself into the rumpled sheets. It's just... he doesn't know... how could Rack? After everything. During everything.

He'd tried to argue his way out of it, but Daniel's been gay for a long time. He's had enough homosexual friends and friends-of-friends to know that an ambiguous call from a health clinic usually only means one thing. The big one.

He shakes his head, the pillow twisting beneath his cheek. They've taken too many chances with each other. The piercings, the ink, all the bareback fucking. He let himself get casual, careless. Stupid, really stupid, especially when he knew that Rack was a time-bomb of sex. One that had to explode – often – or else. How could he have been such a moron as to believe it would have all been saved for him alone?

He'd tried to convince Daniel that it could have been anything. Hepatitis, anemia, a bounced check. You could see through that cover-up, it was so transparent.

You could.

Really.

Daniel curls tighter in on himself. No. He won't think about the chance that maybe Rack's right. That maybe it's just something innocent. They can't tell you much on a message of any kind, he knows that. Some kind of federal law that just went into effect. Hippo? Hippa? Hypo? Something like that. It has to do with Hillary Rodham, he's pretty sure of that much. You can't say anything about anything medical on an answering machine. Anyone could hear. You have to get the bad news directly, from their mouth to your ears.

But he can't shake the idea that he's right, and Rack's wrong. He's been a trusting fool, wanting to believe everything was perfect. That their love was perfect. He'd wanted so much to be in love that he'd just... convinced himself of it, because of the sex and the dirty talk. All those dark nights full of sweat and musk and spunk spilled over each other.

He's done that to himself before. Like with Jesse. He'd only had a few dates with Jesse, but it was enough to convince himself that he could fall in love with the guy. He was blunt, funny, open, friendly. And fucking everything he could behind Daniel's back, while he pretended Daniel was the only one he cared about. Thank God they'd always worn condoms, or else this could have happened a long time ago. He'd already be counting out the days of his life by the number of pills he could tolerate. Getting sick and not being able to even shake a cold off. Then where would he be?

Alone. No Rack. He wouldn't have let himself fall for that punk in the first place. He'd be alone.

Oh, fuck. Fuck! He can't keep laying here and thinking about these things. He'd tested safe before Rack. He knows he hasn't cheated. So Rack must have. It's the only...

Slowly, his muscles sore and kinked up as an old man's, he unfolds himself from the bed and stands up, forcing a stretch. He has to do something, something mindless. He can't keep thinking. If he keeps thinking, he's going to lose what little control he has left.

The workshop. There's always plenty to do out there. If he focuses on the pure feel of wood under his hands, the scent of sap and burning as the saw forces its way through the solid blocks, then he won't be able to think about Rack. Or Jesse. Or the phone call. Yeah, he needs to go to the workshop.

When he flicks on the light, the shop looks like the second home that it is. It's kind of messy; he didn't clean up too well last time, but that's okay. When he's done – and he plans on working until he's exhausted enough to drop – the mindless effort of sweeping and tidying should take every last edge off his ability to think.

There's a stack of pieces lying on his workbench, designs already measured and penciled onto them. He puts on his goggles, adjusting them over his glasses, and picks up a long slender piece. Part of a rocking chair. He'll cut it into rough shape, then turn it on the lathe until it's a beautiful, smoothly beveled dowel.

And it works, at first. The feel and smell and sounds are helping drive other thoughts out of his mind. It's comforting, the way the wood moves under his fingers, as if it's alive -

Until a memory springs unbidden into his mind. The one time he'd allowed Rack to try cutting with the circular saw. He'd always been afraid for his lover's talented fingers, that's why he hadn't permitted him near the machines often. But Rack, just getting over his cold – oh, God, his cold – could that have been? – had insisted. So he'd stood behind him, both wearing thick gloves, and guided him slowly as a creeping mouse through the turns of the wrist and the motion of the saw in the wood until they'd managed to cut out a tabletop. It had been awful – even Rack saw that, and laughed about it, how badly he'd messed it up.

But he hadn't laughed long, because backed into Daniel like that, the curves of his ass bumping against Daniel's pelvis, had produced a reaction hotter than the sparks thrown by the blade when it hit a knot in the oak.

He'd chuckled, and wiggled backwards. "Reckon I'm better with another sort of wood, eh?" he'd joked. Daniel had silently reached forward, switched off the saw, and just held him, moving his hips

in slow circles, prodding him with the proof of his love and desire.

Thinking about this, Daniel shuts his lips tightly and concentrates hard on what he's doing. He came out here to not think, damn it!

Not about Rack painting him like Joseph, with a thousand colors, to make sure the tattoo shades turned out just right.

Not about riding on the back of the bike, his hands wandering south while Rack roared with laughter like a triumphant demon and kicked up their speed.

Not about being tackled when he tried to head out the door of the studio apartment, and dragged back in for one more deep kiss and urgent slide of hands over his...

Not about taking showers together and falling to his knees, taking that metal-studded cock into his mouth.

Not about lying beneath Rack and feeling him slide deep inside, sopping with lube and so careful of the piercings that ran roughshod over his nerves and turned him into jelly.

Not about...

Daniel's eyes cloud over, and his hands keep moving. Turning the wood in patterns so habitual that they're second nature to him.

But he doesn't see the knot in the wood, coming closer to the blade.

He doesn't notice the danger his bare fingers are in as they approach the quickly spinning circle of sharp, sharp metal.

Doesn't realize, until it's too late...

CHAPTER TWELVE

As he's pulling around the corner, heading for Daniel's house, Rack first hears the sound of sirens wailing. His first thought is that it's some cop on his tail, after him for speeding. But no. A glance over his shoulder shows no blue lights. And come to think of it, there's a different pitch to the siren's wail that's not like a copper's car at all.

He speeds on a little further, and he can see lights flashing red-and-white instead of blue. And they're at Daniel's house.

Oh, fucking hell!

Rack speeds up on his bike, desperate to get down those final few blocks. The bike goes as fast as greased lightning. Almost between one breath and the next he's skidding to a stop in the already-wrecked driveway, behind the ambulance parked half-sideways in Daniel's drive.

He drops the bike – *to hell with the bike* – and rushes forward, peeling off his leathers. No one's outside save an EMT rigging up a gurney, and he's got no time for that burly man. Rushing forward, he sees heads moving about in Daniel's workshop.

Oh, holy God. Has he gone and hurt himself? Rack pounds on the door with the flat of his hand, begging entrance. He can't hear what's going on inside, but a bloke and a chit in blue uniform glance his way, and turn back toward the machinery to ask a question. No one moves toward the door.

This he can't take. Scrabbling the key out of his pocket, Rack shoves it into the lock with fumbling fingers and bursts in. "Daniel!" he calls. "Dan, love, what's happened?"

"Sir, you need to move back!" the cow snaps at him. "Mr. Browning, do you know this man?"

He can't properly see Daniel through the flurry the EMT's are making, but he knows Daniel's looked his way – he feels the warmth of those eyes resting on him for a split second. Then he hears: "Get him out of here!"

The bigger man's all action at that, then. Grabbing Rack by his smaller, slender shoulders, he's pushing him out the door.

Not before he's gotten a glimpse of the circular saw, and the trail of blood leading from it. A look at Daniel, near prone in a rocking chair, the lady EMT winding yards of bandages around his arm.

"You need to leave now, sir," the bloke barks, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. "We have to take care of

Mr. Browning, and you're in the way."

"Leave? Bollocks!" Rack protests, struggling to get back in. "That's my lover in there!"

The man's lip curls. Guess he's not much of a one for fags, then. "Sure. But he doesn't want you in there, and we don't want him getting upset."

"But what's happened?" Rack fights harder, determined to turn back around, slip underneath that ham-like arm, and get to Daniel's side. "Is he hurt? How bad?"

"That's none of your business, and –"

"Sam!" the lady calls. "Ready for transport. Do they have the gurney ready?"

Sam pushes Rack out the door and towards his bike without another word. "Ready!" he calls back. "Hank, bring 'er in."

"Fuck you!" Rack yells. "Daniel! Dan, I know you can hear me! Come on, love, talk to me!"

No answer. Just the men wrestling the gurney in the front door, and moments later, pushing it back out with greater care. Daniel's strapped down to it, the yards of white gauze round his wrist and hand already soaking through with crimson. They've hooked up some sort of IV bag, and they're snapping things at each other like "transfusion", "IV", and "morphine". From the small glance he can get of Daniel he looks dazed, eyes full of pain and confusion. It's the look of a child: *How did this happen to me?*

Suddenly, he shakes his head hard, as if to clear it, and tries to wrestle his injured arm away from the techs. "No, don't!"

They try and get it back, gentle as possible. "Sir, we have to _"

"You don't understand." Daniel swallows hard enough to see. "I could be positive."

And doesn't their attitude change at that! A whole new level of wary drops over them, and Rack sees them glance at the blood spatters on their shirts, at the gloves covering their hands. They bark orders to each other that he doesn't understand, and he doubts Dan gets them either. But nonetheless, they load him up in the back of that ambulance careful as a china doll, snapping and buckling and securing him down.

Rack lunges forward again, one thing on his mind – no way in hell is he leaving Daniel to ride to the hospital all alone. He's a grand caretaker, Dan is, but he can't bear for anyone to take care of him. He needs Rack to calm him down, to soothe him so that the professionals can help.

But there's big Sam again, barring his way. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"In!" Rack protests, wrestling him. "I'm going with him."

Sam hesitates. "Mr. Browning, do you want –"

"No!" Rack hears that beloved voice yell, cracking just a bit. "Keep him out of here!"

Sam shoves Rack back. "You heard him. Stop wasting our time. We've got to get him to the hospital."

Without a backward look, he hauls his flabby carcass into the back of the ambulance and shuts the doors with a final, fatal slam. As if waiting for the signal, the lady takes off driving like a bat out of hell, siren blaring a dreadful song.

Rack stares after them, shaken to his core. Daniel... what's he done... will he be...

He shakes himself hard. "Bugger that!" he mutters. Dragging his bike upright out of the gravel, he mounts it like a wild bronco and kicks it into gear. Let the cops come after him if they like. He'll chase that ambulance all the way to the bloody hospital and he'll get himself in to see Daniel, though hell itself should bar the way!

* * *

Daniel feels a little lost, somehow. Confused, deep inside his mind. It's the blood loss, he thinks with the tiny bit of rationality he has left. How could he be so dumb? He knows better. Power tools are dangerous. And how long's he been using those, anyway?

But there was Rack. Rack came back. He saw it all. He wanted to come with him in the ambulance. For one moment, Daniel shuts his eyes tight and just lets himself yearn for that familiar presence: the smell of smoke, jingle of metal, and long fingers clasping his good hand tight.

"...in pain?" a foreign voice asks loudly, bringing him back to himself.

He opens his eyes and gasps as they hit a pothole. "Yes," he manages to get out. Oh, God, he is in pain. No shop accident has ever hurt like this before. He'd seen, just out of the corner of his eye, the blade touching his skin. But the circular saw moves so fast, and the blood spurted up in that split-second before he could jerk back.

It's all Rack's fault, a part of his mind rages. If I hadn't been so distracted...

But no. It was his fault. He should know better, he does know better. Always wear protective gear. And he hadn't.

He looks up and notices that the EMTs are wearing masks, now, and they've donned a second set of longer gloves. They're talking over his head about arteries and stitches and severed tendons, asking questions he can't understand about things that terrify him to hear. And floating in and out of their sentences are the words he hates and fears the most: *maybe positive... maybe positive... maybe positive.*

The radio crackles and they speed up. He can't help a moan as the ride becomes rougher. The bigger of the two men grips his shoulder. "We're nearly there, kid," he says, with good humor that

sounds forced. "We'll get you taken care of."

Somehow that's not as much comfort as it should be. He wants to hear those words in a different voice, but he kicked Rack out of a ride in the ambulance. It's over between them. He has no place there.

Daniel squeezes his eyes shut, burning for the presence of that warm hand on his, that voice murmuring solace and healing in his ear.

But he can't have it. Won't.

And never will again.

* * *

Driving like the devil himself, Rack manages to keep the ambulance in his sights all the way to the hospital. It's only there that the damned traffic, cars and pedestrians, gits flooding in and out with flowers and stopping to crush out cigarettes, keep him from pulling his bike up to the entrance and catching up with the gurney as they haul Daniel out.

Still and all, he manages to catch a glimpse of Dan as he's whisked away into the ER. That bandage on his arm is sopping red now. Rack plunges forward, making hardly any progress, only realizing he's being restrained when the arm around his middle cuts off his air.

He twists around to see a massive man dressed in a security uniform, and lets loose a blue streak of frustrated profanity. "They grow you all this big back on the medical farm?" he demands. "Let me go! That's my Dan in there, gone and gotten himself hurt!"

The behemoth regards him with a skeptical eye. "Are you family?"

"No, but –"

He's whirled around and deposited in a hard plastic chair so fast it steals his breath away. "Then you sit outside here, and you wait, until or unless they say you can go in, get it?"

Rack tries to struggle up, only to have a ham-like hand planted in his chest, forcing him back down. "Stay! They're working on him right now. You wouldn't be able to get in even if you were family."

Fuck, fuck, fuck! Rack worms around, trying to catch a glimpse of the curtains his Dan's disappeared behind. "But they'll tell me, won't they?" he demands – no, pleads, yes, pleads, without any shame left at all. "They'll say if he's all right or not. Won't they?"

"If you're family." The hand pushes him further down. "Now you can wait, or you can go. I don't care. But you're not getting back there. Understand?"

"The hell with you!"

"That's what they all say." The guard glares at him, with just the tiniest bit of sympathy to soften it.

"Look, just stay put. Someone in the family's going to be contacted, and maybe they'll tell you what's going on. Okay?"

No, it's not okay, but Rack realizes with a sinking feeling that he's not going to get any better a deal than this. Shaking, he subsides, letting the fight melt out of him. The guard keeps his hand planted on Rack for a long moment before letting go carefully. "I'll be watching you," he promises.

Rack knows he will, too. Hell, anyone looking crazed as he must be right now... he'd keep an eye out, too.

Sit still. Be quiet. Right... he can do this. Surely he can do this. Right.

He jumps up, pacing in a circle around the plastic chairs. Notices the coffee machine and heads for it. Discovers he's not got enough change in his pockets for a cuppa. Kicks the damned thing and earns himself another glare from the guard. Settles for a long drink at the fountain and thumps himself back down in a seat where he can keep a close, anxious eye on the curtain Daniel's disappeared behind.

A doctor and a host of folks in scrub shirts have scurried back in there. He can't hear what they're saying, only the sound of voices rising and falling. Every so often one dashes in or out with a slip of paper, a vial of blood, more bandages, or some bit of medical equipment he can't identify. He hears murmurs but one word stands out clearly: *possibly HIV-positive* - and Rack's heart aches at that, for it tells him that even in his current state, Daniel still thinks... still believes...

Fuck it all! He's *got* to get in there. But how? There's no way that he can see.

Interminable minutes pass. A tiny blond rushes past him, dressed in workout clothes, vanishing behind Daniel's curtain. She looks a bit familiar somehow. Has he seen her picture before? Yeah, he has, sitting atop Daniel's TV. His cousin. Luz something? Rack's chest clenches and relaxes. God, at least Daniel's got someone in there with him now. But he didn't want himself, did he?

Maybe he won't, ever. But the cousin. Maybe the cousin will tell him something when she comes back out.

He perches, wild-eyed, on the edge of the seat, glued to the flurry behind the curtain. *Come on*, he chants beneath his breath. *Come on, give me some word. A crumb. Anything!*

* * *

Daniel's keeping his eyes shut. He's not squeamish – he's been hurt before – but for some reason the sight of the sutures going in is making him sick to his stomach. They've drawn blood from him, and he almost laughed – why not just scoop it up? But they're running all sorts of tests, and one of them is an HIV panel. Maybe that's why he's sick. Because he'll know for sure, any second now, that Rack...

Oh, God, Rack, he wants Rack so badly he's almost crying. Aching for the touch of that hand on his forehead, for the sound of his voice snarling at the techs for being such gits and warning the doctor he'll have a boot print in his spleen if he hurts Daniel with the stitching-up.

Suddenly, a cool hand *is* on his forehead. His muscles turn to water. "Rack?" he asks, voice trembling.

"No," a female voice answers back. He blinks, startled, because he had forgotten. Luz is looking at him with wide and sorrowful eyes. "Daniel. Oh, Daniel..."

"Luz," he croaks. "You came."

She ruffles his hair back from his forehead. "Hey," she jokes weakly, "some things are even more important than Tai Chi." She sniffles. "I'd hug you if you didn't have more tubes and wires than a transistor radio."

"Me too, sweetie." With his good hand, he reaches for hers, and squeezes for all he's worth. She lifts the hand to her lips and kisses it.

"Daniel," she says slowly. "Rack's outside. Or at least I think it's him. He looks like he's about to go crazy."

Daniel half-laughs. "He's already insane."

She shakes her head. "Dan, why isn't he back here? He didn't - I mean, you two love each other, right?"

Daniel's mouth shuts hard. "Oh, God, Luz..." Real tears start up in his eyes.

"Daniel." She puts his hand to her forehead and rolls it against her. "Daniel?"

He swallows hard. He won't cry. He can't cry.

A haggard-looking technician rushes back in, waving a paper. "Got the results of those lab tests you wanted. We had to call the clinic he went to for a couple of them, but they have a Saturday emergency line."

The doctor, masked and gloved, raises his head just a fraction. "Good. Get the nurse to-

"The HIV test, too."

There's a flicker of something unidentifiable in the doctor's eyes. He pauses. "And?"

* * *

Things have calmed down a bit around Dan's area. Rack shifts and moves uneasily, not sure if this is a good sign, or a bad one. Someone in scrubs goes in, paper in hand.

There's silence.

Then the murmuring of voices, and a broken cry from – oh, God, from Daniel –

And then someone's coming back out and oh God, thank God, they're actually smiling, as if they're relieved. He hears that word again, *HIV*, only this time it's coupled with the word *negative*...

* * *

His hand's been stitched up now, and neatly wrapped in a thick layer of gauze. Daniel doesn't care; he's numb to the elbow from local anesthesia and the rest of him is frozen as ice. The only thing he can feel, a little, is Luz, clutching his good hand and resting her forehead against it. He can hear her crying quietly, but nothing else. It's all a blur of noise and voices.

Finally, she raises her face. There are women who can cry and still look pretty, but she's not one of them. "You idiot," she chokes out. "You idiot, scaring me like that." She leans over and kisses his numb cheek. "Thank God. What made you think you had –"

"Rack," he hears himself answer. And as if that's broken a dam within him, a floodgate of panic and heartache breaks open inside. "Oh, God, Rack! Luz – is he still out there? No – he won't want to see me – Luz, I've fucked up everything, nothing's going to be okay again, he'll hate me now, God –"

"Daniel!" She shakes his shoulder gently. "Daniel, calm down."

"Calm, I can't be calm, we were supposed to be getting committed and he loved me and I threw him out and –"

"Daniel!" Her grip tightens. "Daniel, he's still out there. I can see him through the crack of the curtain. He saw them take the sign down. He's still waiting."

Daniel stares at her. "He's still there?"

"Ten'll get you twenty he wants to see you," she says, softly and insistently. "I know how much you loved – love him. Do you want me to get him?"

Daniel swallows. "He'd probably just come in to tell me how much he hates me," he says hoarsely.

She squeezes. "You know that's not right. I'm asking again. Do you want me to get him?"

Daniel closes his eyes. His heart's beating so quickly he can feel it thunder in his throat. He has to choose. And if he doesn't choose now, he really is going to lose the last chance that he has.

* * *

"Rack?"

The soft, female voice startles him out of the dazed zone he's sunk into. Daniel's not positive. Surely now he'll believe. And he'll call for him, he will...

He glances up and sees the blond in the workout clothes. Luz, Daniel's cousin. Looking down at him with tears standing out in her eyes. He tries to speak, but can't make his mouth work.

"You're Rack?" she asks again, swiping her hand across her eyes.

He manages to nod.

"Daniel wants to see you."

* * *

Daniel's staring at the curtains surrounding his bed, heart pounding, when there's a thud, a flutter, and then, oh, God, the flimsy fabric's being torn aside and a smoky-smelling, pierced, tattooed blond hurricane is heading for him like a force of nature, not stopping until he's grabbed Daniel's good hand in a death clutch and bent his lips to Daniel's own and...

...time stops...

All he can feel is that mouth on his own. That tongue, warm with its cool bit of metal, lapping at his lips, opened in surprise, then slipping in to twine around him, laving the top of his tongue, the inside of his cheeks, counting his teeth. And that hand, grasping his, tightening and loosening like a fluttering heartbeat.

Slowly, he becomes aware of Rack's heat. Of the way he's kissing Daniel, like a drowning man in search of water. Of the hot droplets falling onto his face, and the cooler-feeling ones running down his cheeks.

Everything else fades away. Just the taste of Rack, the feel of that mouth on his own – that's all that's left, and that's all that matters.

One last, deep foray into Daniel's mouth and Rack tears his lips away. The blond head buries itself in the crook of Daniel's shoulder. He can vaguely hear things being muttered: "- ever scare me like that again, I really will kill you. God, how I love you. Don't you ever... fuck, Daniel, why?"

Daniel shakes his head. "You can't forgive me," he manages to croak out. "You can't forgive me and I can't blame you because I'm such a jackass."

"Not forgive you?" Rack jerks his head up, face tearstained, but incredulous. "I'm mad as hell, but not forgive you? Fuck, Daniel, you're all my life and everything in it."

"You –"

"Love you. God, how I love you." Another quick, deep kiss, and Rack's resting his forehead on Daniel's own. "Why, Dan? Why did you think I'd betrayed you? I'd never. Not in a hundred years, I'd never."

All Daniel can do is shake his head. "Sorry," he whispers. "So, so sorry."

"Make no fucking mistake, I'm furious," Rack goes on, voice shaking. "But you've scared the bloody hell out of me, and I can't hate you. Could never hate you anyway." He runs his hand down

to cup Daniel's damp cheek. "Love you."

And something breaks open inside Daniel's chest. His tattooed, pierced chest that matches Rack's. Every mark burns like the brand that it is. "Love you," he whispers. "Forgive me?"

Rack half-laughs. "Forgive you? Hell, yes, I forgive you. But I can't forget. And I don't want you forgetting, neither. I'll never be false to you. Never!"

"I know that now, I know."

"You'd damned well better." Rack buries his face briefly in Daniel's shoulder again, then lifts it to kiss him, hard and fast enough that the heart monitor starts beeping wildly. "Your hand?"

Daniel half-laughs. God, it seems so unimportant now. "No tendons were cut. No arteries. Just a good slice out of the meaty part. They stitched it up, inside and out. It'll heal."

"God – good." Rack kisses him a third time. "So good. You don't know how scared I was."

And Daniel's reaching up to card his fingers through Rack's hair, to bring him down for a fourth kiss, participating this time, clattering their tongue brackets one against the other in the clicking rhythm they've heard a hundred times before. "I didn't mean to," he whispers when their lips part.

"No one ever does," Rack says softly. "Just – never again, okay? Promise me never again."

Daniel looks up into the wet blue eyes, those eyes that he loves – yes, *loves* – so much. And he promises, with each and every bit of his heart, because what was broken is now mended, what was chipped away has been replaced, and what was damaged, will now heal. "I promise," he says. "Promise you."

And tubes or not, Rack's arms are slipping around him. He holds Daniel tightly, chest to chest, and the two of them are together again as they ought to be. Daniel presses his face close and breathes in his lover's scent as Rack whispers, "Dan, Dan, Dan," in a comforting litany.

And it's over. Thank God. It's over.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It's a small car. Very cute, very tiny, very yuppie. Deep rose colored. There's a keychain-sized fluffy pink pig dangling from the rearview mirror. Normally, Rack wouldn't be caught dead in a car like this.

Tonight, it's a chariot straight from Heaven.

Rack glances wearily over at Luz, behind the wheel. She's still dressed in her workout clothes, pretty much the worse for wear. Spilled a cup of coffee on herself, she did, when he made a remark about exactly where he'd pierced Daniel. Good thing it was hospital coffee. No burns to worry about with that lukewarm crap.

He thinks he could really get to liking this woman. She's small, like him, and full of fight. "Born in the year of the Tiger, were you?" he asks apropos of nothing.

She snorts. "And what were you, born in the year of the T-Rex?"

"Ha bloody ha, pet." Rack wriggles for a more comfortable position.

Luz drags a handful of hair, escaped from her ponytail, back out of her face. She executes a left turn that leaves Rack pale with fright. "Fuck! Get us back home in one piece, will you?"

"From what I hear, there's a least two dozen detachable pieces on you, and those are the ones in places ladies shouldn't know about."

Rack looks at her with admiration. "No blushes now, eh?"

"I've had time to get used to the idea. Besides-" she changes lanes, one, two, three, in a slick maneuver – "it suits you. Almost there." She flashes him another grin. "So, you really think I should get a tattoo?"

"Oh, hell yeah." Rack reaches out a finger and traces random designs in the air. "On your shoulder blade, like. Nothing cutesy, mind. But maybe some kind of Kanji, seein' how you're into all that martial arts shit. Something that means 'warrior' or 'fighter'."

"Hmm." She considers. "I like that. My opponents can get a good look at it when I walk away after stomping their butts into the mat."

Rack laughs – God, that's something he thought he'd not be doing tonight. "Luz, take this how you will, but if I weren't queer as a two penny flute I'd do you in a heartbeat."

"Sweet talker." But she's not offended, he can tell. She's grinning. He reckons he'll get her coming by his parlor sooner than not. Maybe he'll get Mei-Li to do her tattoo. There's just something feisty about this little thing that makes him think that pair would get along just famously.

She swings the little car around another curve, and there they are, at Daniel's house. Gravel crunches beneath the tires as she pulls up as close to the door as she can. With a soft punch to Rack's shoulder, she turns around. "Daniel? Hey, Dan?" she calls softly. "Home sweet home."

In the back, Daniel stirs, but doesn't really wake. He makes a low complaining sound and twitches.

"Home, pet." Rack unclicks his seatbelt. "You stay put. I'll come 'round to help you out."

"Hey." Luz puts out a hand to stop him. In the dim glow of the porch light, he can see her face. It's tired, lined with worry. "Listen to me for a sec, okay? That's my cousin back there. We have a big family, but we're close. So I know Daniel. He's like a brother to me. He's a very important Daniel-shaped person in my life."

"Pet, now you're babbling."

"Shut up and listen." She takes a deep breath. "I mean, he freaked out. He does that sometimes. Not often. You know he keeps things deep down inside him."

Rack picks at the upholstery. "Never before with me," he says softly.

"Stop that." She slaps at his hand, but her face is gentle. "So now you've seen the darker side of Daniel. But we know what all that business with the clinic was about. Okay, so he's anemic."

"I mean to get a few good steaks down him, never you worry about -"

"That's not it. You saw what he can be like when he shuts people out. And from what I can tell, Dan acted like an utter, complete, and total asshole. Right? So don't let him get away with it." She tightens her grip on his arm. "But don't leave him, okay? I can tell that if this was for real, if you walked out of his life, he wouldn't have a life left."

Rack studies her face. "Nor would I have anything to live for, without him," he says quietly. "And I mean to make sure he gets that."

"Good." She loosens her grip, and rubs his arm. "Hope I didn't leave any bruises."

"You're a strong bint, and no mistake."

"I'll take that as a compliment." She glances in the backseat. "He's fast asleep."

"Looks like it, love." Rack twists about and gives Daniel a gentle shake. "Wake up now, Dan. Wake up."

"Mmm?"

"Come on, then. I know you're tired, but up you get." Rack wiggles out of the front seat and around to open the back door. "Sit up, there's a lad. Take my hand with your good one."

"Do you need help?"

"Nah, I've got him." Rack puts one hand behind Daniel's back and pulls him upright. "He's always muddled when he first wakes. Give him a moment, he'll be right." He's got Dan out of the back seat now. Woozy, the taller man's wobbling with just him for balance. "We'll be off now."

"Be careful."

"I mean to be."

Luz lets out a long breath of air. "Good enough."

They stand and watch her back out. Rack winces at the way she pulls out into traffic, spraying gravel. *Two bike skids and then she finishes the job of wrecking all that neat work*, he thinks. *Dan's gonna have a fit.*

But that's something to worry about tomorrow, or at least when it's light out again. He gives Daniel a pat to the chest. "Come on. In you get."

"The key's under the..." Daniel mumbles.

"You think I don't know that? Got my own, anyhow."

"Oh." Daniel wobbles. "I would have thought you'd -"

"Toss it? Not likely." Rack studies him, feeling a fresh lance of hurt. "Not much faith in me, have you?"

"Rack..."

"Hush for now. Let's get you inside."

It's a bit awkward with the weight differential, but Rack manages to drag Daniel, rubber limbs and all, to the workshop door. Bugger, it's unlocked. Stupid EMTs, anyone could have broken in and had a field day lifting all this lovely equipment. Still and all, from what he can see everything's intact. He winces. Probably on account of the blood spilled about in gelatinous puddles.

Even so far out of it as he is, Daniel notices, and makes a face. "Rack, I gotta clean this up. It'll stain."

"No." Rack's firm. "It'll do no more damage in another couple hours than it's done already. You're going inside if I've got to kick your arse every step of the way."

Daniel makes a small noise of complaint, but he lets Rack manhandle him inside the door to the

kitchen. Once there, Rack hesitates, looking about. Should he get a good meal down him? No, he'd never stay awake long enough to chew it; might choke. Come morning he'll go and buy liver, steaks, iron pills, all that rubbish, and start forcing it down him whether he likes it or not.

Right now, though...

He smooths his hand down Daniel's chest. "You reek, love," he tells him frankly. "Come on, we're drawing you a bath before I let you into your clean bed."

Daniel's a bit more awake now. "They didn't take out any piercings, did they?" he mumbles, patting himself down.

"We'll count once you're naked." That earns him a half-grin, and Rack deals the same back. He hitches Daniel's arm more securely around his shoulders. "Come on, into the bathroom."

Dan's more or less walking under his own steam when they get to the bathroom, but Rack's taking no chances. He flips the toilet lid closed, and wrestles Dan around. "Sit there while the tub fills, will you? There's a good bloke."

He turns the taps and plugs the drain. Should he add anything? Nah... plain water's likely best. Hot as Dan can stand it, which would be just short of what you need to boil a lobster. He's had more than one bath with his lover that's left him pink-skinned and complaining, and not in a good way.

Seems to take forever, but finally the tub's full. He turns back to Daniel, only to find him drowsing again. His eyes are slitted open, but they're seeing only dreams. "Daniel, wake up," he says quietly but firmly, with a little shake. "I know you're tired, but I'll not have you drowning."

Daniel gives a little start, then blinks at the steaming tub. "Rack, they said to keep the bandages dry."

"Which is why I didn't start a shower for you, and why I'm gonna be here to make sure you keep that hand clear of the water," he explains patiently. "Now come on, get your kit off."

He helps a bit on the rough spots. Dan's shirt was trashed, so they gave him a button-down scrub to wear home. Rack bites his lip as he undoes the snaps, one at a time, revealing the tribal tattoos in all their glorious color, and the double piercings of Daniel's nipples. He'd like to tug at one of those, but...

Squaring his shoulders, he undoes the button and zip of Daniel's jeans. They're splattered with blood, too, though not as much. Still and all, he'll be tossing them in the trash. No more reminders of this night than are necessary, thank you.

He spreads a towel on the bottom of the tub for traction. No slipping down and drowning, either. Not that he intends to take his eyes off Daniel for a second.

Daniel's moving on his own power, now, and he steps into the tub with a sigh of utter relief. His skin goes pink straightaway as the steam rises from the water. He lets out another deep, bone-rattling sigh, and lets his head fall back against the lip of the tub. "This is perfect," he says quietly.

"Rack... thank you."

Rack's been getting sponge and soap from their hanging rack off the shower spigot. "No need to thank me."

"Yes. There is." Fingers tug at the legs of his jeans. "You shouldn't be here. I told you to go."

"That you did. But I'm still here."

"I don't deserve you," Daniel whispers.

Rack doesn't look down at him. "I suppose you don't. But I'm here, aren't I?"

"Is it ever going to be the same?"

"No." There, there's a bottle of some sort of goop that looks like it won't smell too girly or sting. Rack reads the directions on the back. "And we'll be having a talk, you and me. But for right now, you lie still and let me wash you."

"I can -"

"Not and keep that hand dry." Rack sinks to his knees. "Shut your gob and let me do this."

Daniel closes his mouth. His eyes are wide and fearful as he looks at Rack, then he closes them, too. Not in sleep, but more as if he can't quite bear to look at the man. *Sacrificial lamb*, Rack thinks, seeing him laid out.

He's gentle as he washes the lithe body. Soap, sponge, rub gently in circles. Careful of the piercings, and how lucky are they that none of those got removed? Can be right painful to replace them sometimes. Daniel's bandaged hand dangles outside the tub. It twitches every now and again, as if he'd like to touch Rack. He doesn't.

The water turns pink, after a bit. Smudges and smears of blood that got through the fabric of his shirt onto his skin. Rack sets his jaw and continues, all across the patterns of his torso, down his legs. He saves the pelvis for last. He's gentlest of all, there, mindful of guiche and PA. His touches aren't meant to arouse, but the feel of his familiar hand works its magic on Daniel; he's half hard by the time that Rack's done.

Rack studies Daniel's cock, just abreast of the water, with almost detached interest. *Stupid git*, he thinks suddenly. *It's not all about the sex. I'd have stayed with you... even if.*

Slowly, he reaches down with his hand and grasps the partially firm flesh. Proving he's awake, Daniel inhales sharply and arches his back. A bead of pre-come forms at the tip of his cock, a single pearl. Time was, Rack would have bent down to lick it off. Now, he takes his hand and swishes water over the organ, hard enough to stick out of the water. This isn't about getting clean, this is about getting dirty again.

Maybe. Rack doesn't move his hand again. He merely holds Daniel's cock in his fingers, letting

their tips drift over it. Always has loved the feel of a prick in his hand. Hard and soft, velvet over steel, with a thrumming pulse.

Daniel seems half afraid. His hips tremble, but he doesn't move.

He could make Daniel come. With just one touch, one stroke. He's that worked up. But his love's trembling, and not just from anticipation. Daniel knows what Rack's thinking. "You play my touch like a violin," Rack murmurs. "A body knows what the brain doesn't."

He isn't sure what he means by that. And it doesn't matter. "Stay there," he directs, going to find the man something to wear. Daniel's taken to sleeping naked, never knowing when Rack might pounce, but he thinks he knows where a few sets of washed-thin PJs might be.

Mission successful. He returns with a pair of paper soft jammies, top and bottom, and places them on the toilet lid. Yanking the stopper out of the tub, he watches the pinkish water start to gurgle away, then touches Daniel's shoulder. "Out you get," he directs. "I'll dry you off, and you can dress yourself."

Meek as any child, Daniel obeys him, his erection sticking out obscenely as he tucks it into the soft pants. Rack eyes it, aching just a little bit, but he's firm. "Go lay down on your bed," he directs. "I'm for the shower. I reek, too. But don't you fall asleep until I come back, understand? We've talking to do, you and me, and I don't plan to let it wait for morning."

Dan's eyes are miserable. "I screwed up so bad," he says softly.

His back turned, where Dan can't see, Rack shuts his eyes tight. "That you did. Now off to bed with you."

He hears the soft bare footsteps padding away. The last of the pink water gurgles down the drain. Alone at last, in a bathroom he knows as well as his own – hell, that has his own bathing kit stored in the tiny windowsill by the shower head – he keeps his eyes shut and, just for a moment, lets the shakes take over.

Then he opens his eyes. He's not got where he is today by letting himself go under. He needs a shower, a hot one, with lashings of soap. He needs to be rid of the clothes he's worn for so long – sweated in, cried in, paced and waited in. They feel gritty and gummy on his skin.

Underneath the spray, set so that it feels like gentle needles piercing his skin, Rack braces both arms against the wall and lets the water wash his scum away. Soap and sponge, shampoo and waterproof hair gel. Carefully cleaning around his own cock, working it gently between his hands. He doesn't get hard, and that doesn't surprise him. The pierced skin hangs heavy and flaccid in his hands as he goes over the bits with a soft washcloth.

All clean, but Dan's got a hot water tank fit for a team of players to take separate showers, so the water's still hot. He braces himself against the wall again, lets the water pound gently against his back, and he thinks.

His mind goes back to the first day he met Dan. Gormless tit, he'd thought, watching that truck pull

up to the empty storefront that would be his salon. He'd been expecting a fat, ham-handed, sweating oaf of a man. But then Dan had stepped out of the car, light glinting off his spectacles and outlining that gorgeous body, and he'd fallen.

Maybe it had been too perfect. You know? Everything going so right. The sex, the companionship, the falling into one another's lives easy as puzzle pieces. Something like this was waiting to happen, and now that it has – what next?

He's not giving up. That's for certain. Even if, now that the relief over Daniel being okay has passed, he'd love nothing more than to throttle him senseless. Rack isn't one to let his heart go lightly. Not after all he's been through in the past. Daniel's not the first lover he's washed blood off of. And often enough, he's been the one washing crimson smears off himself.

He grips his cock in one hand and squeezes, feeling the metal. Nothing. Then he thinks of Daniel, laid out like a prize on that bed of their, legs akimbo and arms out for him... and his organ twitches. He thinks about their firsts for everything – teaching Dan how to rim and be rimmed in a memory scented with fruity lube.

The first time he took that cock into his mouth and sucked down the salty come. Dan's cock is just the right size for him. Doesn't make his jaw ache, but it fills his mouth perfectly.

And he's a gentle lover. Never thrusts up to make Rack choke. When it comes turn and turn about, he's got a wicked tongue and a way of nudging all the piercings that makes his head spin.

Rack works his wakening erection gently, not stopping. The water's still hot as it pounds on him. He and Daniel, together, they've had the best sex of his life, and he's had experience for comparison. They fit together. His cock in that tight channel; those legs draped over his shoulders.

He'd thought they trusted one another for everything, even if it dazed Daniel sometimes how easily the confidence in Rack came. Ink and piercings, he went along with it all meek as a lamb, and beamed like a child at the pleasure it gave him. He trusted that Rack meant the best for him, and he came off happy.

Then this afternoon, it all went to hell, didn't it? Rack works his cock, angry-hard and purple now, savoring the pricks of pain. He'd been kicked out. Tossed aside like an unwanted puppy. Where the hell did all that trust go then?

He realizes he's putting it off, the inevitable. They can't go on unless they've had this out. Tired or no, tonight Daniel faces up to the truth. He can't shut Rack out unless he means it.

Fierce as a tiger, wiry as a panther, Rack stands up straight beneath the shower spray and shakes his head. They need to have a talk, they do.

And no time like the present.

He shuts the water off roughly and snatches a towel from the rack. Roughly rubs it over himself, just getting the worst of the wet off. Scrubs it through his hair, leaving it a tangle of messy waves instead of in his usual spikes. Rubs his cock hard with the soft terry, not mindful of his jewelry. It

protests, but he pays that no mind. It's hard as ever, protruding from his lower belly in a silent statement of want.

No PJs for him. He'd drown in anything Daniel has to offer. And somehow, he doesn't want any clothes between them for this.

He doesn't realize his hands have curled into fists as he stalks out of the bathroom, down the short hall to Daniel's bedroom. Talk. They have to talk. That's all he can think of, cock aside. Talk first.

There's a lamp lit on the bedside table, and Daniel's settled himself down – not in the middle, but on what they've come to think of as "his side". He's propped up with pillows, his bad hand resting at his side. And when he sees Rack, he gives a small and guilty start.

Rack stands in the doorway for a moment, naked and unashamed. He knows what he looks like – some sort of tribal warrior, ready to do battle. And the look in Daniel's eyes tells him his combatant's ready to throw down his weapons.

He's sorry. Rack knows that. But bloody hell, he needs to hear it.

"So," he says crisply. "See anything you like?"

Daniel shifts. His shirt rides up and Rack can see that he's still hard underneath those PJs. He swallows hard. "Rack..."

"Hush." Rack stalks toward the bed, fists at his side. "You want me up there with you?"

Daniel nods, eyes huge.

"Then ask me."

Daniel swallows again, then reaches out with his good hand. "Come here?" he asks, voice tremulous.

"Since you're so polite about it." Rack crawls onto the bed near Daniel's feet. Knowing full well what it'll do to him, he moves up the bed in the way he knows looks like pure sin and sex, panther-stalking, until he's braced over Daniel on his knees, with a hand on either side of the pillow.

They're staring at each other, face to face. Without his glasses Daniel looks boyish, childish. His eyes are huge and dark and afraid. And shining with tears. "Rack."

"Hush." Rack stares at him for a long moment. "I talk first. Where the hell do you get off, tossing me out like a bit of rubbish? That all I mean to you?"

Daniel shakes his head hard. "No. Rack, I—"

"Thought you trusted me. Thought you loved me."

"I did – I do – I –"

"Then why, Daniel?" He leans in, his breath ghosting over Daniel's face. "Tell me why."

The first of the tears spills. "I was scared, Rack."

"Scared of me?"

"No. I –" Daniel chokes a little. "That call, and I was just so afraid, and it was all I could think of and I got so angry."

"Got a little mad myself," Rack says coldly. "Let's get this straight, Dan. You don't play games with me like that. I don't fuck around when it comes to the man I love."

"You still love...?"

"Everyone deserves a second chance." He stares Daniel in the eye. "We've meant that much to each other I've got to give you that. But you pull that shit one more time – you know what that did to me, thinking you believed I'd do that to you? One more time, Daniel, and it won't be you leaving me. It'll be me leaving you, and not looking back. You understand me?"

Daniel nods, head going up and down. "I was wrong," he says, voice shaking. "God, I was so stupid."

Rack waits.

"I was wrong."

He waits.

"I did wrong."

He waits.

"I should have trusted you."

He waits.

Daniel reaches up with his good hand, almost afraid, and ghosts it over Rack's angular cheek. "Can you forgive me?"

"Already said I did, love." Rack bends a little closer. "But you needed reminding. Never again, Daniel."

"Never again."

"You're to believe what I say, when I say it, 'cause I don't lie to you."

"I know," Daniel whispers. "God, I was such an idiot –"

"You were." Rack waits. And wants. "I said I'd forgive, but not forget. You're not to forget either. We put this behind us now. But you remember it, next time you're tempted to –"

"I won't be. I swear."

"Swear?" Rack dips down to kiss the softness of those lips, and tastes salty tears. "That's serious talk, Daniel."

Daniel's lips press against his, a little desperate, before drawing back. "I swear."

"You know, then?" Rack lowers himself a little, resting his pelvis atop Daniel's. The PJ bottoms are so thin they might as well not be there, and the feel of hardness scudding against hardness makes them both gasp. "You belong to me."

"To you." Daniel strains up, trying to meet Rack's mouth with his own. "I promise."

"Forever and always."

"Always."

Rack rewards him with a kiss, soft and gentle. He runs his tongue piercing along Daniel's, listening to the rattle. "I'm claiming you, Dan. You're mine."

Daniel nods eagerly. "Anything."

"Not just anything." Rack slides a hand up under Daniel's shirt and pinches tightly at one nipple, tugging at the loop there. "Everything. All of it."

He lets his face come down, close enough for Daniel to reach up and kiss. He does, his lips soft and gentle. "Rack," he whispers. "Why? Why aren't you just –"

"Because, you stupid tit," Rack says levelly. "I love you."

There's a *whoosh* of air in Daniel's chest. "Still love me?"

Rack kisses him again, harder this time. "Always love you. Gonna show you, too. Gonna take you for my own. Claim you. Make you mine again."

"My hand?"

"Not gonna need your hand." Rack kisses him one last time, a fierce kiss, then draws back, sliding his way down Daniel's body just a bit. His fingers find the waistband on the PJs, and tug. "Lift your hips, love." He pushes the shirt up, rucking it beneath Daniel's chin. "Let me in."

Daniel lifts his hips, and Rack draws the garment down to his knees. "Kick them off," he says quietly. With one hand, he reaches for the bedroom drawer and the lube inside. "I said I'd claim you. Are you willing?"

In answer, Daniel spreads his legs. "Willing," he breathes. The tears have stopped, and his eyes are shining with a new light.

"Good." Rack scoops a dollop of the clear jelly into his hand. His fingers are gentle as he slips them back behind Daniel's balls, down to the pucker that he knows so well. "Mine," he chants softly. "Gonna make you mine again."

"Yours." Daniel struggles to find a way to grab, to touch Rack, and finally lets his hand come to rest on one wiry thigh. "Yours. And I'm such an idiot, Rack."

"Sssh." Rack anoints his cock with the rest of the lube, and takes hold of Daniel's legs with slippery fingers. "Over my shoulders, love."

Knees nestle in, hooking him tight. Rack poises himself at the entrance, and pauses for one last look in Daniel's eyes. "You sure about this?"

"Rack." Daniel is staring at him, glassy-eyed with need and, yes, love. "I belong to you."

Rack allows himself one small smile. "That," he says, "was the right answer."

With one deep thrust, he pushes himself in, scraping over the spongy mass of nerves. Daniel gasps deep inside his chest and arches, good hand fisting. "Mine," Rack repeats on the withdrawal, and a third time as he pushes forward again. He tugs and presses at the guiche, working Daniel's sweet spot for all it's worth. "You're mine."

"Yours," Daniel babbles. "Yours, all yours, all yours..."

It can't last long. Rack's too worked up. He can feel his own pre-come adding to the lubrication, and Daniel's own cock is drooling thick, heavy strings onto the muscled belly. He reaches down to grasp it in his hand, flicking the PA with his thumbnail. Then he squeezes hard. "Mine!"

Daniel arches and yells and comes, milky fluid spattering his chest and the multicolored designs there. The squeezing and contractions in his channel take Rack by surprise.

With a muffled groan he bends forward and orgasms, flooding Daniel with his love and his spunk.

They stay like that for a moment, frozen in a tableau of ebbing freneticism, breathing hard and harsh and fast. Rack draws out slowly, so very slowly, and gently eases Daniel's legs off his shoulders. "Love you," he says gently. "Don't you ever forget again."

And Daniel smiles, reaching out to grip Rack's leg. "Love you."

Rack moves, and Daniel's hand flutters. "Don't go —"

"Only for a cloth, love. We're a mess." Rack kisses Daniel's forehead. Reaching up, he fumbles some soft wipes out of the night stand drawer. Soft caresses clean the come off Daniel's belly, and that what's leaking out of him. Rack tosses the used papers onto the floor. Later's the time to worry

about more mess than this.

When they're cleaned, he rolls off Daniel, taking care not to lose skin contact. Gently, he nudges Daniel onto his side, careful of the bad hand, and nestles up behind him, spooned close as skin will let them be. "Rest now," he whispers, brushing Daniel's hair back. "Rack's got you."

Daniel fumbles for the hand that's slipped over his belly, twining fingers together. "You won't leave?"

"Not going anywhere." Rack kisses the soft skin under Daniel's ear. "Rest," he urges. "I'll be here when you wake up. And we'll be back to the way we were, only better. Hush, now. Rest. Rack's got you," he croons. "Rack's got you."

"Rack," Daniel sighs. His eyes are shut, lashes brushing his cheek. "Love you."

"Love you, too." Rack lets his own eyes fall shut. "And I've got you. Now and always."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Daniel stirs and rolls over in bed. One arm goes searching, swimming through the covers, hunting for Rack's warm body. He must have accidentally turned loose and rolled away.

But instead of a familiar, solid, warm and slumbering body, his arms sweeps through the sheets and finds – nothing. Not even a warm depression where he would have lain.

His eyes open in panic. "Rack?" He kicks the covers away from him and sits up, scanning the room. "Shit!" No Rack. Not in the rocking chair, not on the far side of the bed. He can see where he slept, though. The covers tossed aside, a hollow in the middle of his pillow. Daniel feels. That's gone cold too.

"Rack!"

"What?" A mildly irritated, spiked head pokes around the corner to the bedroom. "About time you woke up, then. Silly git to take an afternoon nap at your age. Come on to the kitchen when you're awake; dinner's almost done." Blue eyes narrow at him. "You didn't think I'd done a runner on you, did you?"

Daniel shakes his head, rubbing at his eyes. "I didn't know what to think," he admits.

"Well, next time, look and see my coat hanging in the corner and my boots by the edge of the bed, will you?" The suspicion eases into a smile. "I've promised you, Dan. I'll not run off and leave you without a word. Not even if you are the very devil to wake up once you're down for a snooze."

Daniel manages a grin. "I know. I just – I still –"

"I know." Rack's face softens. "But we hold to our promises, eh?"

"We hold to our promises," Daniel agrees with a rush of relief.

"Now, has your majesty the drama queen finished, and can I get back to the stove?" Rack brings one hand into view, waving a spatula. "Steaks are gonna burn."

Daniel manages a grin. "I'll be there in a second."

Rack arches one eyebrow. "Might want to get dressed, first," he says saucily, with a flip of his spatula as he leaves.

Daniel glances down at himself. Naked. Oh. Oh! Yeah. Rack had been a little... enthusiastic... when

he came home from his doctor's visit with all the bandages off.

Slowly, he folds his scarred hand into a fist, and clasps it with his good hand. He still can't believe the size of his lover's heart, or his willingness to accept him again.

Well, he'll just have to show him how glad he is, won't he? At every single opportunity.

"Oi!" Rack calls from the kitchen. "Shake a leg!"

Daniel moves off the bed, slowly standing up. Outside, the summer sun is just going down. He slept a long time, then. Funny how exhausting it was to get good news.

His hand's going to be 100% fine. Scarred, but he won't even need physical therapy beyond maybe squeezing a tennis ball a few minutes a day. Each finger works with the same dexterity as before. He can go back to the shop. Back to being his own man.

Back to showing Rack, without the bandages in the way, exactly how much he loves that sexy hellcat's body of his. How much he loves him.

"Come on, then!" Rack calls, sounding amused, not aggravated. He knows how slow Daniel is to wake up after a nap. Sometimes, when he's not off burning some of his boundless energy, he'll laugh at Daniel and tease him, mussing up his hair and offering to bring milk and cookies. *Just like a big child you are*, he'll say fondly. *Do I have to dress you, too?*

And Daniel usually finds the mental acuity to wink at him and say, *If I ask nicely, will you?*

He laughs a little to himself as he staggers up out of the bed and around the room, picking up his clothes wherever they fell, were peeled off, or were thrown a few hours ago. Jeans, a comfortably faded T-shirt. No use bothering with shorts or socks. He'll want to shower and put on fresh in a little while.

Barefoot, he pads into the kitchen. Rack, dressed in a studded leather vest and faded blue jeans, is holding court over Daniel's gas stove, expertly stirring this and tossing that, nimble with wooden spoon and spatula as he is with his tattoo gun. Rack glances up at Daniel and gives him another one of those smiles that are uniquely his – so deliberately sexy that they beg to be kissed.

Daniel moves forward, bent on doing that – and finds a glass of orange juice shoved in his hand. "Oh God, no," he moans. "Not more of this."

"Iron rich. Drink it down," Rack orders, lifting a skillet to toss multicolored pepper rings in olive oil. "And then you can have one cup of coffee. Only one, mind you."

"Yes, Mom."

"Here!" Rack pops him lightly on the back of the head with a miraculously free hand – but gently. "You'll give me an Oedipus complex, you will."

Daniel pulls up a kitchen chair, close enough to Rack's legs that he can reach out and run his hand

down the length of them through their faded blue denim, and sips determinedly at his juice. "You know Oedipus Rex?"

"I went to public school, same as other lads." Rack critically eyes the pepper rings and turns down the heat.

"Trust me," Daniel says between swallows, "what you don't remind me of is my mother."

"And a damned good thing, too."

Daniel puts his empty glass on the counter, and reaches – stretching a bit – for the coffeepot. Rack swats his hand away and pours him out one small cup. "Here."

Daniel peers at it woefully. Coffee inhibits iron intake. As soon as Rack found out about that, his pot-a-day habit dwindled to one or two measly cups. He hadn't been sure he'd survive.

Well, he'll enjoy what he has. Scooting in a little closer, he rubs small circles on Rack's leg. "So what's for dinner, honey?" he teases.

"Turning me into a proper domestic, you are," Rack grumbles, albeit with a tiny grin of self-pride. "Steak, baked potatoes, peppers, broccoli salad, and for you, more juice. For me, tea."

"No fair, hogging all the caffeine." Daniel takes a long, loving swig of his coffee. Rich, dark, bursting with flavor. Damn, but Rack makes the best coffee. It turns drinking just one cup into a sin. "Like you wouldn't – and didn't – live on P.G. Tips and cigarettes before you met me." He holds out his cup. "Just a little more. Top me off. Please?"

Rack turns to glance down at him, grinning with the tip of his tongue curled behind his teeth. "Love," he says in his lowest, most *eat-me-up-alive* voice, "You won't need anything but me to top you or keep you up tonight. All night long. Get the picture?"

Daniel swallows. *Oh, hell yes.* "Yes, sir," he says meekly. Rack waggles his tongue at him and turns back to his cooking, giving the salad a toss. The smell of some spicy vinaigrette drifts out, setting Daniel's mouth watering. When he cracks open the oven to take a peek at the broiling steaks, turning them over, he almost drools on himself.

Still... steak again, third time this week. "Looks good, eh?" Rack asks with pride in his skill. "Almost done."

It looks ninety percent as good as sex. But – "Can we afford all this?" Daniel asks doubtfully. "I'm not the world's greatest shopper, but I know what's cheap and what's pricey."

Rack tastes the peppers. "Mmm. Never you mind about that, eh? Had an artist come in today and sign a contract for a full back piece. No idea where she got all the dosh, but she paid in advance. Wants the whole of the *Mona Lisa* on her, in pointillism. That'll take weeks, maybe even months. Plus, Loopy Leopard paid a visit. Had enough money on her for three more stripes down her arm."

Daniel has to laugh. He's met the woman in question, a big-cat handler at the state zoo. Slowly but

surely, she's been covering herself in tiger stripes. She even has them going down her cheeks in delicate, feathery lines that almost look like downy fur. Rack did those, the first of his work on her, and now she won't go to anyone else. He gets a lot of business from referrals, and all her pictures go in his portfolio.

"She's lookin' downright savage," Rack goes on. "Those snaps'll do me well on the tattoo tour. But that Mona Lisa -" he whistles. "Crazy sort of bint, if you ask me, but she paid up in full, in advance, and it's a nice bit of a challenge, so hell if I'll be arguing with her."

Daniel sips his coffee and frowns. He's still not sure how tattoo artists decide on what they charge; it all seems kind of arbitrary to him, but they all seem to know by instinct what costs what. "Rack, how much -"

"Let me put it this way, love." Rack flips off the oven. "That bit of art on your chest, there? I'd have charged seven hundred dollars for that. And it's not a photo-tat, like she wants. We can afford to bloody well eat steak until it comes out of our ears."

"Mmm." Daniel snuggles his head against the pillow of Rack's thigh, turning his head to one side. "There's something else I'd rather eat."

"Like hell, after I've gone to all this trouble."

Daniel sits back, amazed, and has to laugh. "You? You're turning down getting your dick sucked just because the steaks are gonna go cold?"

"Not just the steaks. The potatoes, the peppers; that salad's going to go limp, and - hey, here, watch it!"

Daniel's not above playing dirty. With a nudge to the knees here and a strong arm around the hips there, Daniel's turned him around and pinned him fast with arms around both legs. He nuzzles the point of his chin into Rack's groin and grins up at him. "We can re-heat," he wheedles.

Rack's eyes flare, soften, then twinkle. "It's no good tempting me."

"Not when you tempt me the way you do already." Daniel presses one soft kiss over the zipper. "Come on. Let the supper keep. I have caffeine in me, and I must act!"

Rack ruffles his hand through the tips of Daniel's hair. "This is getting long," he says, apropos of nothing.

"I like it this way. Shaggier."

"It'll cover your glasses."

"So I'll cut bangs. All the better to see you with."

"And you're the Big Bad Wolf, now?" Rack puts down his spoon and spatula, and drapes his arms over Daniel's shoulders. "Going to eat me all up, are you, love?"

Daniel nudges Rack's vest up with his nose, and licks a straight line over his pubic bone, just above the edge of his jeans. "If you let me."

Rack inhales sharply. "Right," he says unsteadily. "I'll just turn this lot onto simmer, shall I?"

Daniel bites a thin fold of the skin. "You do that."

"And we'll go back to the bedroom."

"We could. Or..." Daniel manages to catch Rack's zipper in his teeth... "We could have a little fun right here."

"Bloody fucking hell." Rack's hands fist at his sides. "You're not - you wouldn't."

"You're already hard," Daniel whispers. "Baby, let me make you feel good."

Rack's fingers weave through his hair. "As if you don't already. Sorry, sexy bastard that you are."

"Sweet talker." Daniel carefully slips the heavy weight of Rack's cock out of his jeans. It falls into his palm, glittering in the last of the sunlight and the reflections from the range. "Maybe I'll get some of these," he muses, bending down to nibble at the ladder, pinching just a little, pinching just right. Rack bucks forward a little. "I'd let you put them in."

"Like I'd give up fucking you long enough to let them heal."

"There's lots of other things to do," Daniel reminds him. "Like this, maybe." He dips his head and takes just the tip of Rack's cock into his mouth, sucking hard enough to hurt. His startled gasp lets Daniel know he's on the right track. Easing the swollen organ a little further past his parted lips, he lets his tongue nudge at the dolphin. Push it a little, this way and that.

Rack's hands in his hair turn into fists. "You keep that up, love," Rack says hoarsely, "and I'll come like a fuckin' fire hydrant in your mouth."

Daniel chuckles. Then, when Rack groans, he does it again, drawing the cock further still into his mouth. If he can just - he's been practicing this - it bumps the back of his throat, and he eases just that little bit further, feeling it slip down the edge of his throat - then swallows.

"Holy fucking hell!" Rack thrusts forward, and Daniel swallows again, exulting inside. *I did it! I finally figured out how!* He works his throat again and again, squeezing the muscles tight around the tip of Rack's cock.

Rack's thighs begin to tremble. "Sweet Jesus, show a little mercy," he pleads. "You're killing me, love."

Mmmmmm... and it tastes so good. Daniel reluctantly backs off. His throat feels raw and sore as he pulls loose, but oh, so good. He drags his tongue along Rack's ladder as he pulls off, then looks up at him.

Rack's got white lines of tension around his lips, His cock is pulsing with such a hard beat that Daniel can see it and he can taste, lingering on his tongue, traces of the pre-come he must have swallowed. He licks his lips to capture any lingering drops, and grins. "For you."

"Oh, God, love." Rack's fingers shake. "You, with your lips all puffed up and shiny for me. I didn't know... no one's ever tried... fuck me, I –"

"Gladly," Daniel murmurs, dropping his mouth again. He rolls the fat head over his tongue, then slips that beneath Rack's retracted foreskin. There's no telling what Rack says this time; it's all just gibberish, but it's good. His hands bend and flex, almost painful but not quite, as Daniel devours him. Thick pre-come ribbons onto Daniel's tongue, one trickle escaping down the corner of his mouth.

Rack stares at him, gyrating his hips ever so gently. "The way you look," he says hoarsely. "The way you feel. Just you wait till I've had my turn."

"Tell me," Daniel murmurs, tickling with the tip of his tongue. "Tell me what you want to do to me."

"Want you," Rack gasps, as Daniel scrapes his teeth along the thick vein, "want you to ride me. Me, flat on my back in that bed of yours and you on your knees above me. Want to see you with that good, perfect hand covered in lube, shining on your fingers. Want to see you touch yourself, shoving those fingers deep inside."

"You wouldn't be able to stand it," Daniel mumbles. Wickedly, he dips down and licks a wide stripe over Rack's balls, down to the guiche behind them. Then he tugs with his teeth. Over the blue string of curses, he murmurs: "You'd get in on the action. Tell me you would."

"Damn right." Rack steadies himself with an effort, his eyelids fluttering. "Don't – not again – it'll be over too soon."

"Soon can be good." Daniel tweaks the guiche with his fingers this time. "But tell me. Tell me what you'd do to me."

"I'd push your hand out of the way," Rack rasps. "Push it back, and put my own hand up to your sweet little hole, stretched open, all ready for me. All my fingers fitting in. Then I'd take my thumb and I'd push... push... push, ever so gentle, till you had all of my hand in you. Oh, fuck, Daniel, fuck –" He bucks hard. "What the hell was that?"

Daniel grins. "Something I learned on the internet." He laves Rack's cock like an ice cream cone, then comes back to the P.A. and pulls roughly with his teeth. "You know you want to come," he murmurs, letting his lips tickle and buzz the swollen flesh. "I can feel it. The way you're shaking. Let it go, baby. Come on and let it go for me."

"Daniel..."

"Want you. Need you." Daniel darts forward, sucking him down hungrily, and swallows fast.

"God!" Rack's hips snap back, push forward, and suddenly Daniel's mouth is filled with a flood of come, salty and bitter, slick on his tongue. He moves quickly, swallowing all that he can and chasing the rest with his tongue, washing Rack clean before at last, regretfully, he lets go.

Rack sags backwards against the counter, staring at Daniel. "You little minx," he says in admiration. "For that, I'm not only fisting you, I'm fucking you till you taste me in the back of your throat a second time."

Daniel leans forward on his chair, chin resting on the back, and grins up at Rack. They've come a long way since that rough patch, but when he's like this, he wonders if maybe they're not better off for it. They know how much they need each other now. Like air, like water, like food. Rack is his life.

He looks up at his lover, disheveled and limp, cock hanging out of his jeans. *Wild. Beautiful. Punk. Beloved.*

Then he lowers one eyelid in a slow wink and grins. "Promise?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Riding on the back of Rack's motorcycle makes Daniel feel like he's flying as they tear hell down a two-lane road. There's nothing to hold on to but Rack's narrow waist, taut with the effort of steering that hulking machine at bat-out-of-hell speeds. Right turn, left turn, so fast they lean into them and nearly brush the ground. Rack's taken him for rides before, but they've been tame. After that blowjob last night, and what happened after that, he guesses his lover's feeling a little... wild.

His lover wants him at the tattoo parlor today, "just for a bit of company, like. Not much going. Promises to be slow," Rack'd said over breakfast. Another day with his workshop closed, but hey, he is pretty much caught up, and he's thinking about what Rack had suggested: "Hire an assistant. Maybe a kid from the tech college. They'd be glad enough for some cash and a bit of practice."

It's not a bad idea. He can afford it, just. And he'd get to spend more time with Rack. Like Rack says, where's the bad in that?

But he'll think about that later. Right now, he's leaning into the air rushing past them, hanging on tight, and enjoying thinking about hanging out with the "family" at Rack's shop. Most of all, though, he's glorying in the thrill of the ride.

He tightens his arms a little harder around Rack's waist, loving the feel of the tight muscles under his leather and T-shirt. His legs are stretched wide to accommodate the girth of the bike, leaving his cock pressed hard against the saddle. Rack's chuckled to him about the good vibrations from riding the fuck out of a bike, but he never got it before.

God, does he ever understand it now. It's like someone turned a taser to "orgasm" and tagged him in the balls. Feels so good, he halfway thinks maybe he'll buy a buzzy dildo and tease Rack into using it, although come to think of it, he probably won't have to tease much. Especially not if it's a double-headed dildo. But, thinks Daniel as he leans forward and draws in a sharp breath, there is definitely more than one good reason to ride a motorcycle.

He hooks his fingers into claws and scratches at Rack's belly. It contracts under his touch, the abs clenching. Can't hear if Rack made a noise, but Daniel bets he did.

You know, in the beginning, it was all Rack. He can still remember that first: "You want to fuck or what?" – if he closes his eyes, he can hear, see, smell, taste that moment in time all over again after all these months. But here and lately, he's really starting to enjoy being the one who gets things started. Take last night. If you wind Rack up really well, you're in for a hell of a sexual tornado until he calms down.

And sometimes, the perfect opportunity just presents itself, all wrapped up on a platter. Like now,

on this bike, with all that machinery roaring and purring between his thighs. He's hard. Damned hard, aching for some release. Wonder if Rack knows?

He inches forward and presses himself firmly against the curve of Rack's ass. Those abs jump again. Daniel laughs out loud for the joy of the sound. This is way too much fun to be legal.

Wonder if it's got Rack worked up the same way? For just a split-second, Daniel has a flash of a daydream about slipping his hand a little further down, beneath Rack's belt and... but then again, it's broad daylight on a busy city street and they're surrounded by SUVs and station wagons.

He gives that notion up with a little sigh. Damn. It'd be so much fun to try.

Naah.

He couldn't.

Could he?

Hmm. It seems that the fingers on his better hand have developed a mind of their own. They're playing – just playing – with Rack's belt buckle. Beneath his other hand, he can feel Rack's muscles rippling like so much water. Laughter, or arousal? What the hell does it matter?

He sneaks one finger under that buckle. Nothing to get arrested for there. He's just holding on tight and he's slipped, a little. But Rack gives a flinch as if he's been bitten.

Oh, bad hand. There goes another finger, both sliding a little deeper.

If there's one thing Rack is, it's well-hung. And apparently, right now, very happy with the bike's vibrations and Daniel's misbehaving hand. He can just hook the tip of the loop of Rack's P.A. in one fingertip.

Should he?

No.

But he's going to.

He tugs, ever so lightly.

Rack stiffens. His head shakes back and forth hard. Daniel stops, unsure if now he's gone and pissed him off. Then Rack peels one gloved hand off the grip and holds it up in a "wait" gesture.

Oh, yeah?

Well, would you look at that? The turn-off to the business interstate is just up ahead. This time of day, almost no one's going to be on it. *Go, Rack, go!* Daniel silently cheers.

Rack takes the turn-off as if he's running from the devil straight into an angel's arms.

All right. This is what he's talking about. Screw that one finger at a time business. Bold now that they're alone on the road, Daniel plunges his hand down the front of Rack's jeans, firmly grips his very hard, already damp, pulsating cock, and squeezes for all he's worth.

This time he does hear the "Bloody hell!" over the roar of the motor. He laughs again, rubbing himself just a little against Rack's ass.

Not much room to maneuver. He needs more. Hanging on for dear life with the one arm around Rack's waist, his hand – damn, that is one wicked hand – undoes the snap on Rack's jeans and tugs the zipper down just far enough. Oh, yeah. He squeezes Rack's cock again, thumbing the tip and moistening his hand with the wetness he finds there. Now there's room and there's slickness enough for him to keep that death grip and jerk hard, up and down.

He hears muffled curses on the wind as it roars past his ears. Rack wriggles his hips, pushing back against Daniel's own hard-on, then nudges forward into his grasp.

This is dangerous. Really, really dangerous. So he's gonna make it hard, quick, and never to be forgotten. Squeezing hard as he can, he jerks Rack off with sharp tugs of his wrist. Pre-come slides in slick little trails over the back of his hand. He pauses to dab it onto the already wet cock, and starts again.

Rack's chest is puffing in and out, as if he's panting. His driving isn't suffering, though. Daniel loves that. God, how focused do you have to be to have someone giving you a hand job like this and still pay attention to the road?

His own cock is throbbing, and he's almost dizzy with the wind whipping past them, the engine howling, and the warm feel of Rack and leather and solid, pulsating cock in his palm. He tugs hard on the P.A. and digs his thumbnail into the slit.

Rack caterwauls like a demon. And he starts to move.

How the hell, Daniel doesn't know. But he's driving with his hands steady while his hips are pumping, sliding back and forth on the seat as if it's greased, from pushing against Daniel's bulge to straining forward in Daniel's hand, and he's breathing as if he's running down the road instead of flying on that cycle.

Daniel whoops out loud and tugs harder, Rack's piercings crushing together in his grip.

He feels Rack's thighs begin to quiver and shake. And he dares – just for a moment – to hang on a little less securely and move his other hand down to that cock, swiping up a finger-full of pre-come. All the while still moving his first hand up and down, hard, hard, hard.

Carefully, he lifts his finger to Rack's mouth under the half-hooded helmet. There's a pause, and then a hot mouth is surrounding his digit, suckling hard, teeth digging in almost deeply enough to break the skin. His lover gives one spasm, his hips buck, and it's like lava, the hot spunk spilling over Daniel's hand and dribbling onto the seat.

Daniel waits until the shaking has stopped and the panting has eased a little. With the clean hand, he lifts the edge of Rack's T-shirt, dragging it high over his stomach. With the come-soaked fingers, he rubs circles into the hard muscles, massaging the slick stuff into that skin. Rack gives another hard shudder, rolling his neck on his shoulders.

Laughing, Daniel presses a hard kiss between Rack's shoulder blades. He tucks him away, feeling little twitches and trembles, like earthquake aftershocks. The zipper goes back up. His fingers are too slippery to do the button, so he leaves that open.

Rack groans, and it's only after a second that Daniel realizes he heard that loud and clear. That they've slowed down and come to a stop on the otherwise deserted road. He puts his feet down, feeling the heat of the pavement radiate through his sneakers, and lets go of Rack's waist.

Uh, oh. Did he piss him off after all? That was pretty stupid, taking a risk with both their safety on the bike, and –

Rack's whipping off his helmet and twisting around in the saddle. His eyes are wild as lightning and crackle with twice as much electricity. "That," he growls, "was damned stupid. And fucking fantastic. You know how lucky you are I'm as good on this thing as I am?"

From somewhere deep inside, another laugh bubbles up out of Daniel. "I know I'm lucky," he says, gripping Rack by the shoulder. He leans forward and steals a rough kiss, one that somehow turns into a long, tongue-battling embrace. When he pulls back, he's grinning. "I'm lucky. That's good enough for me."

"You're a fool," Rack says bluntly – but he can't hide his own smile. A wicked, evil smile. He nudges his ass back on the seat, hard against Daniel's own cock. When Daniel gasps, Rack's smile curls up at the edges. "Got a little problem there, mate?"

Daniel pushes against him. "Not so little."

Rack makes a low noise in his throat. He grabs Daniel by the collar, then drags his hand down until it's gripping his cock through his jeans, kneading roughly. "I guess we should take care of that, shouldn't we?"

Daniel shrugs – although by God, if Rack stops that, he's going to die – "If you wanna."

"Oh, I wanna. Hell, yes, I wanna." Rack's fingers work at him. "Funny how I just somehow managed to stop near this nice, boarded-up gas station here. You know," he says thoughtfully, "I'd be willing to bet there's a back way in there that a person might just find a way through. Or there's that nice little copse of trees across the way." He leans in. "What do you say? A long, slow fuck on concrete or a quick, dirty screw behind a pine tree, bark diggin' into your back?"

"You bastard!"

Rack's eyes glitter like his jewelry. "No one ever said I was a nice guy, love. Now go ahead. Choose."

Daniel swings his leg off the bike. "Trees," he challenges. He grabs Rack by the back of his jeans and tugs. "Trees, now!"

His hand – damn, there it goes again – slips a little further down than he intended. His eyes widen when he encounters slickness. "You knew!" he accuses. "You knew I would – and we would –"

"Yeah. Because I know you." Rack grabs his face with both hands and kisses him roughly, feverishly. "You gonna make me wait all day?"

Daniel lets the laughter fly free once again. "Like hell." He pushes Rack ahead of him, starting them running. "First one there takes it up the ass!"

And as long as he lives, he'll never forget the glance Rack flicks back at him, smoldering and loving at once.

Daniel slams Rack's back against a tree, the first one they reach that provides any kind of cover from the road, and kisses him until he has to gasp for air. "First one there," Rack murmurs, "is a man in love. In love with you."

"Gorgeous." Daniel kisses him again. "So fucking gorgeous. Love you too. So much. Need you."

But as he's reaching for Rack's zipper yet again, a hand shoots out to grab him by the wrist and stop him. He looks down in puzzlement, to see Rack's face lit up with a blazing, teasing glow and deep seriousness in the blue eyes. "So," he says. "Let's talk about that commitment ceremony," he says. "And let's talk about it now."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The bike's laying on its side in the driveway. This in itself isn't surprising. For someone who loves his cycle as much as Rack professes to, it spends a lot of its time cast down carelessly in the gravel. Only difference is, this time Rack's squatting beside it, poking and prodding at the innards with a wrench.

Huh.

Daniel's still bleary-eyed, on his first and only allowed cup of coffee, and sore in all the right places from the night before. He stands at his kitchen window – damn, really do need to get that fixed – and watches Rack adjust this and crank that. Occasionally, he stops to look perplexed, scratching his temple and leaving behind black streaks of grease.

Oooh. He'll need a shower after that, the little devil on Daniel's shoulder exclaims, hopping up and down with glee.

And he could probably use a cup of coffee now, the little angel informs him primly. *Get dressed and go see if you can help.*

"What I know about engines, you could stuff in my left thumb," Daniel mumbles, taking another swig of the heady dark brew. It's not as good as Rack's, but dammit, it's the one cup he's permitted to have in the mornings, and he's going to savor it.

Hello, that's your lover out there. Covered in grease. Wearing a vest and a pair of jeans that look like they've been painted on, the little devil pants. *Besides, you can sneak a second cup of coffee if you take one out to him as well.*

Naughty! scolds the angel.

Daniel mentally flicks the winged creature off his shoulder, and pets the one with horns and a tail. He likes things best when they're horny, anyway. "OK," he mumbles, draining the cup with relish. "Let's go see what grease monkey is up to."

He glances down at himself, dressed only in a robe, gaping open. "Clothes might be a good thing, though."

Says who? the devil asks, swinging its tail in one hand.

"You take temptation to a whole new level."

It's my job.

In the end, Daniel does end up throwing on jeans and a T-shirt – old, battered, soft, and yes, tight enough that he has trouble sliding them over his hips. He's gained a little weight with Rack feeding him the way he does. Luckily, they get enough exercise in bed that it's not a problem yet.

Grinning sneakily, he refills his own cup, pours one for Rack, and heads out through the workshop door. Rack doesn't notice the bang of the door, being completely lost in the oily innards of his bike. He's staring at a loose lug nut in his hand and looking utterly baffled.

"Where the fuck does this go?"

"I could make a joke about oily nuts." Daniel can't resist it. "But it's kinda early for that, don't you think?"

Rack's grin is like the sun coming out from behind the clouds. "Dan, love."

"Hey." Daniel's smile is almost shy. "Good night last night."

"The best." Rack rubs his cheek, leaving another smudge of oil. "I'd tell you to get your arse over here for a kiss, but you'd get covered in muck."

Daniel gestures at his clothes. "So why do you think I wore stuff from the rag bag?"

Rack tilts his head back and laughs. "I'm that irresistible, even covered in engine grease, am I?"

"You know damn well you are." Daniel extends the mug in his right hand. "Coffee?"

"Bloody wonderful. But if you really don't mind, a kiss first. C'mere."

Daniel crunches across the gravel, careful not to spill. Rack stands, and seeing that Daniel's hands are full, takes him by the shoulders and lifts himself up a bit, fitting their mouths together like puzzle pieces. Their tongue studs click gently, one against the other, almost like wind chimes, as Rack twines them both together. Daniel can feel the slick engine grease soiling his arms, but he could care less. Slick = oily + Rack = good, in his opinion, and yes, he's projecting, but it brings up good memories. He deepens the kiss, sweeping Rack's mouth with his own tongue, only drawing back for air and a regretful nibble at his bottom lip.

Rack's eyes are sparkling wickedly. "Now that," he husks, "is how you say good morning, in my opinion. And you've got handprints on your shirt now."

Daniel glances down, and bursts into laughter. Two perfect black handprints, one on each bicep. "No big deal. Here, coffee."

"Ta, love." Rack takes the cup gratefully.

"Didn't even stop for breakfast before you got started on this," Daniel chides gently. "Who's always fussing at me to eat?"

Rack has the grace to look shamefaced. "Well, you know how it is. Woke up and got to thinking I'd heard a bit of a knock in the engine last night. Figured I'd investigate."

"Woke up and decided you wanted to play, is more like it." Daniel lifts his own cup and sips gingerly. Hot! "You love getting down and dirty."

Rack grins wickedly. "You don't?" He takes a healthy swig of the coffee, and makes a face. "Love, welcome though it might be, this is terrible."

"You know I can't make coffee for shit." Daniel runs his hand down Rack's arm, stopping at his mucky hand. "That's what I need you around for."

"That the only thing I'm good for."

Daniel pretends solemnity. "Yes."

"Yeah?"

"That and fucking me into a coma every morning, afternoon, and night."

"Oh, yeah. That." Rack grins. Takes another swig, emptying the mug, and puts it down with a grimace. "God almighty, Daniel, it's just pouring water and measuring coffee grounds. What's got you so confused about it? And don't think I don't know that's your second cup. You get away with that this once, 'cause you brought me some, understand?"

"Yes, sir." Daniel drains his mug as well, burned taste and all. "Just as you say, sir."

"Ooh, sir, I like that. Could get used to it."

"Don't count on it."

"Eh, well. A body can hope." Rack wipes his hands on his jeans as best as he can, then pats down his pockets. "Move away from the bike a bit. I want a smoke."

Daniel scowls. "And you yell at me about health."

Rack does look shamefaced at that. "Yeah, yeah, I know." He extracts a cigarette, puts it to his lips, lights it and inhales. "Rotten, filthy, dirty habit that tastes so bloody good and calms my nerves."

"You get your smokes, I get two cups of coffee in the morning," Daniel bargains.

Rack squints at him through a cloud of smoke. "Not on your fucking life."

"Seriously, though." Daniel leans against the wall and opens his arms so that Rack can rest back against him. He's used to the secondhand by now, but dammit, if Rack gets to play mother hen, so does he. "You ever gonna quit those?"

"Mmm." Rack exhales. "Might do, if I was properly motivated."

"And what's the proper motivation?"

He bursts into chuckles. "Someday, I might tell you."

Daniel pinches him. "Asshole."

"Damned straight."

"As a Slinky."

Now Rack's giggling. He takes a final drag, then tosses the smoke and grinds it out beneath his boot. "That's true enough." He wiggles around in Daniel's arms, grinning wickedly. "Not that you're not glad of it."

"More than glad." And he's so sweetly wicked, so naughtily tempting, that Daniel just has to lean down for another kiss. The devil made him do it, he thinks vaguely as his lips move over Rack's, drawing him into the dance.

When he lets go, Rack's eyes are hazy with want. He sways a little in Daniel's arms. "Fuck. Who taught you how to kiss like that?"

"As I recall," Daniel steals another quickie, "You did."

"Damned good teacher I am, then." Rack wraps a smudgy hand and arm around him. "But there's a few lessons left. Always are."

"You're saying I'm not good enough?"

"Love, you're good enough to turn Georgie W. queer. All's I'm sayin' is..." Rack glances behind them, at the windbreak of pine trees between Daniel's lot and the next, "is that a bit of a lesson never goes amiss."

Daniel grabs his arm, rubbing in slow circles. "Something you wanted to teach me?"

"Oh, yeah." Rack leans up and bites Daniel's chin; a quicksilver nip. "The fine art of exhibitionism. That we haven't tackled yet, have we?"

Daniel feels his heart start to pound a little faster, and no, it's not the coffee kicking in. "You're kidding."

"I'm not. It's early, no one else is about, and you've got those lovely trees to hide us." Rack cajoles. "At least I'm not asking you to take it up the ass in the middle of a boulevard. Just a bit of this and that."

"And what does this and that involve?" Daniel's cock is beginning to fill at the look in Rack's eyes. So wicked. So tempting. The devil on his shoulder's got nothing on the demon in his arms.

Rack nudges their hips together, letting Daniel feel his own hardness. "You," he breathes. "You do that to me, just thinkin' you might let me have my way."

Daniel swallows. "What's your way?" he asks, rocking lightly against him. "Like this?"

"Oh, no." Rack frees himself from Daniel's arms and begins a long, slow slide down to his knees in the gravel. When he's on a level with the bulge in those too-tight jeans, he glances up, glittering brightly as his jewelry. "Like this."

He buries his face against Daniel's cock, nipping at the denim covering it. "And like this," he murmurs. "And a bit of this..."

Daniel's knees buckle. He leans back against the house for support. "You've got to be kidding me." But God, he hopes Rack isn't.

"Kidding?" Rack's fingers probe at the zipper to his jeans. "Painted on, these are. I'm supposed to resist this? No man alive, least not one that loves you, wants you like I do, could say no to this."

"Uh-uh," Daniel breathes quickly. His cock's pressed so tightly against the zipper that it hurts, the metal teeth biting in. "Do it."

Rack pauses. "That an order?" he asks, eyes gleaming bright.

"Fuck, yeah." Daniel reaches down to run a hand through that spiked-up hair. "Do it."

Rack toys with the zipper, drawing it down one agonizing inch. "Do what, love?"

"I have to spell it out?"

Another inch. "Do what, shall I?"

"Oh, hell," Daniel gasps. "Suck me. Suck me hard. Do it, now."

"That," Rack murmurs, "was the right answer."

He jerks Daniel's zipper down the rest of the way, and his quicksilver mouth is there before Daniel can blink, nuzzling into the nest of crisp curls at his cock's base. Sucking one ball and then the other into his mouth, rolling them on his tongue while Daniel's cock leaks and paints patterns over his forehead.

"Oh, my God," Daniel gasps, staring.

"Nah, not God," Rack releases him long enough to murmur. "Just me."

"You'll do."

Rack paints a long stripe up Daniel's cock and pauses long enough to suckle the tip fiercely,

probing with his tongue. "I'd better, hadn't I?" he releases Daniel long enough to say. "Hold onto what you can grab, pet."

Daniel snatches futilely at the air before his fists land in Rack's hair, pulling his face forward. "Suck me," he orders, not caring any more if his voice carries, if the nosy neighbors are getting an eyeful. All he cares about is that hot mouth surrounding his cock, the pull of suction down its length, the tongue stud pressing on his underside. "Suck me, Rack."

"With pleasure," Rack whispers, his tongue snaking out. He draws circles around the tip of Daniel's cock, leaking heavy pre-come. "With pleasure, love..."

Dirty hands make prints on his hips. Rack's mouth is all his world. And when he comes, it's in a blaze of light that outshines the sun.

Rack draws off, licking his lips. Come glistens on his face, and Daniel hauls him up to kiss it all away, savoring his own taste.

"Liked that, did you?" Rack murmurs, licking his lips.

"Oh, yeah." He's taut as a bowstring, and Daniel's almost boneless, but he pushes Rack around until his back is braced against the side of the house. He's almost sure the neighbors are watching, now, but he so doesn't give a damn.

Daniel sinks to his own knees and grins up at Rack. "Only one thing could make it better," he says, already jerking at Rack's zipper. "And lucky me, I can make my wish come true."

Rack grins down at him, sunlight glinting off his piercings. "What's that, then?"

Daniel grins back up, wicked as the devil on his shoulder. "It's my turn now."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"I love," Rack says, breathing heavily on the tip, "your cock. I ever tell you that, Pet?"

Above him, Daniel fists his hands in the covers. "Once or twice."

"Could look at it all day. Taste it." Rack's tongue flickers out to lap off a bubble of pre-come. His hand snakes forward, wrapping around the shaft. "Touch it."

"Come on, already." Daniel's legs shift eagerly. "Suck me."

"Since you ask so nicely..." Rack slides those hands up the softness of Daniel's inner thighs, creamy white, to the juncture of his hips. Daniel moans, arching his pelvis a bit, giving Rack a prime view of his cock, hard and ready.

"Want you," he whispers, husky, then suckles the tip into his mouth. He clicks his tongue stud against Daniel's PA, savoring the way that makes his boy shiver.

Slowly, he slides his mouth further down, swallowing Daniel's prick in a smooth, steady motion. It tastes of musk, and soap, and the bittersweet stickiness of pre-come. Daniel arches beneath him; Rack can hear him babbling nonsense words as he works at the shaft with his tongue. Rack runs the tongue stud up and down the heavy vein on the underside of Daniel's cock to make him jump and squeal. Careful of the teeth, now, but his boy doesn't mind a little nip...

He worries at the delicate skin with the gentleness of gossamer on velvet. "Coming," he hears Daniel gasp. Feels Daniel's hands reach down to grip his shoulder, urging him on. "Do it again. Harder."

Rack nibbles ever so carefully, then slides forward and swallows. Daniel's hips snap forward as he lets out a wordless cry of triumph, exultation, bliss. Rack has just enough time to draw back and let Daniel come in his mouth instead of down his throat. He licks his lips, determined to let no dribble or smear go to waste. A fine treat, his boy is, and he won't miss a drop of him.

He draws off, tenderly licking the tip. Tugs at the ring once, and lets Daniel's cock drop. Running his tongue along his lips, he looks up with the devil in his eye. "So, love. Was it good for you?"

"You - you bastard," Daniel gasps. His arms find something to do in reaching out for Rack. "Come here."

Rack crawls up the bed, draping himself over Daniel's body. Daniel wriggles. "You want to play turnabout?" he suggests, grinning.

Rack kisses Daniel's forehead. "Three times in one night, love. It's enough to wear an old body out."

"Better not be getting worn out. We've got this tattoo tour to prepare for, not to mention a certain commitment ceremony."

Rack waggles his freshly hennaed hand in front of Daniel's eyes. "Not likely to forget, am I?" They share a kiss. "And not just because of this." He holds Daniel tight. "You're the one for me. Thought I'd found it with other people - happiness - but I reckon I was just waiting for you."

"That's sweet." Daniel pecks Rack on the lips. "Speaking of which, I do get to go on this tattoo tour, right?"

"Get to go?" Rack elbows him. "You're my model. Gonna show off your ink. Some of the best work I've done, that, especially your chest piece."

He rolls off Daniel, cuddling up to his side and raking fingernails down the elaborate tribal piece. "Still, need to update my portfolio a bit. I've been taking pics every chance I get down at the studio, but I need a prize piece. Something I can mount on a board."

"Something that says, 'hey, I had the balls to ink this, and look how good it turned out?'" Daniel teases.

Rack elbows him.

"You'll find something." Daniel tucks his head against Rack's. "You could always do something new on me, you know. Some kind of big, elaborate design."

"Not much left on you that isn't inked, love."

"My arms. My legs."

"Naah. Got plenty shots of arm and leg pieces. Backs as well. Some nice stuff, too. I need something special, something different."

Daniel nudges at Rack. "What about my cock? Tattooing it, I mean."

"Your -" Rack's head comes up. "Are you daft? D'you know how much it hurts to get a cock tat done?"

"Probably a lot," Daniel admits. "But if you really need a star piece..."

Rack flops back down and stares at the ceiling. "I won't touch your willy with a tattoo machine. But it's not a bad idea, actually. Just need to find someone who can take the pain." He rolls over onto his arms, his eyes alight with the new plan. "Maybe something like a snake. A cobra with a flared head on the mound, a tail wrapping around the cock itself..."

"Hey. Volunteering here."

"What, you?" Rack gives him a sideways look. "Answer's no, and case closed. I'll find some pain junkie out there and do it for free. Had a few regulars ask me about it from time to time. I'll just look them up and see what's what."

"But, Rack -"

"No, Daniel." He rolls out of bed, climbing down the ladder to the loft. "Best we go find some breakfast before the shop opens. Got a lot to take care of today."

Daniel stares wistfully at his lover as he begins rustling through discarded clothes for something clean to wear. "I'll do it," he whispers.

"No, Daniel."

"Rack, I -"

"No!"

* * *

"You really think you can find someone to do it?" Mei-Li hangs over Rack's shoulder as he combs through the Rolodex of his clients. Shelly had made him buy the damn thing and start recording information in it; finally, it's coming in handy. If he could just read his own writing.

Mei-Li pokes at one card. "How come you can render the fuckin' Eiffel Tower in sepia so it looks like a photo, and you have the handwriting of a serial killer?"

"Ha bloody ha," Rack grumbles. "This one might do. He mentioned wanting something on his cock."

"Yeah, I'll bet he did. Maybe like you."

"He should get so lucky." Rack plucks the card out and sets it to the side. "Think there's a few more in here."

"Heads up! Honey at twelve o'clock."

Rack jerks his head up. "What? Where?"

"Through the front door." Mei-Li thumps Rack on the shoulder. "Get your head out of the inkwell, babe."

Daniel it is, smelling of fresh-cut wood, flakes of sawdust clinging to his jeans. As for what the jeans are clinging to... Rack swallows. "Love," he starts. "You want to do lunch? Reckon I've got a bit of free time, we could -"

"No." Daniel slams a sketch down on the counter. "You need a star piece. I said I'd do it. And I

meant it."

"And I said no, and I meant that." Rack leans over, balancing on his knuckles. His lips are inches from Daniel's. "Not gonna do that to you."

"I can take the pain."

"It's not the pain I'm worried about."

"What, then? Why won't you let me do this for you? See, I drew up a design." Daniel shoved the paper at him. "It's a Victorian vine. It'd be perfect. You could incorporate piercings with jewels like flowers, and-"

Rack takes one glance at the sketch, then crumples it up and tosses it in the trashcan. "You have any idea what would be involved, Dan? Shaving, first off. Then the needle on that tender flesh. No wimping out."

"I've never wimped out yet." Daniel stares his lover down. "I can do this."

"Well, I don't want you doing it! I'd have to take pictures. Lots of 'em. Before, during, after. Then they'd go up on a big board. And some folks would want to see it, personal-like. You'd have to drop trou for strangers. Think I want the world and his cousin seeing your cock on display? That's mine." Rack pokes at Daniel's lower belly. "Marked as mine."

"So this is just a possession thing?" Daniel snatches his drawing from the trash. "What about showing off the flag? I'd have to unzip for people to see all of that. Or isn't it good enough to show off?"

Rack's mouth opens and shuts.

Daniel scowls. "I see." Stuffing the drawing in his pocket, he turns on his heel and stalks toward the door. On the ledge, he turns back to yell: "I'd do it to you if I only knew how. You're good enough, and I'm willing. But you're too stupid to see what kind of chance I'm offering!"

The door slams.

Mei-Li peeks her head out of her booth, looking worried. "Uh... Rack. Did I just hear you turn down sex?"

Rack's hands curl into fists. "Not sex," he growled. "Get back to work."

Mei-Li hesitates, just long enough for him to know she's staring at him, then slowly draws back behind her curtain.

Rack takes in several deep breaths. It isn't like Daniel to challenge him that way. He doesn't mind putting ink on that beautiful body, but this is different. Why can't he see that?

* * *

"No? I see. Yeah, can't blame you for changing your mind. Does hurt a good bit. Thanks for talking, though. We'll get you in for that armband soon's you feel like coming around. Yeah. Bye, then."

Rack hangs up the phone and tosses another card into the growing "no" pile. Just two left, and then he's up shit creek. All the men who'd boasted about wanting some kind of art on their dicks lost their nerve soon as they got back home. Either that, or they had a girlfriend who'd set it on fire if they saw it inked.

He sinks his head into his hands and groans. To top it all off, Dan isn't answering his calls. He's gotten no work done that afternoon, between playing on the phone and smoking, stewing over his lover's attitude.

"Rack?"

He looks up sharply. Everyone's known to leave him alone, him clearly being in a snit, but not Amber. Adjusting the shawl across her shoulders, she leans across the counter. "Rack, are you okay?"

"Does it look like it?" he spits bitterly. "Need a special piece for the tattoo tour. No one's comin' through on wanting to get it done. Except Daniel, who's determined I start inking him up willy-nilly."

"And you don't want that?"

"Don't want - Amber." He leans forward and takes one of her small hands in his own. "I love putting a new design on my man. But not this kind. I can't cause him that much pain."

Amber glances up at the piercings on Rack's face, then down to where the hoops on his nipples show through his tight T-shirt. Her mouth quirks. "Somehow I don't think that's the whole problem," she says gently. "What's really wrong?"

Rack stares at her. "What if I fuck it up?" he whispers. "I do it wrong, he hates it, and then he hates me. It's just a few weeks until we're committed and off on tour, love. I couldn't bear it if he backed out now."

"Rack." Amber covers his hand with her own. "Daniel has more faith in you than you do in yourself. Maybe you should listen to him."

Rack pulls back. "And maybe I should think of something new," he grumbles. "You've got customers waiting. Get back to work."

She doesn't move. "Just think about it."

"Go!"

As she moves away, Rack begins patting his pockets down again. He's just been out to smoke, but God, he needs another one. Damn Amber, anyway. The last thing he needs is someone poking their

nose in.

Damn Daniel, too. How can he ask Rack to do that for him? To him?

* * *

Night's fallen. Daniel hasn't returned a one of his phone calls, not all day long. Rack has his cell phone on and waiting, and the landline in the shop is free, but nary a ring does he hear.

He sweeps the floor himself, something he most often leaves for a cleaning lady, a luxury he affords himself. Many's the time he's come down from a session with Daniel to find Wanda packing up her mops and brooms. He'll share a chuckle with her over the upstairs antics, and slip a five in her pocket as she turns to go.

Well, she'll have one less thing to do next morning. Because he's doing this proper. Right and straight to the corners, getting up every last bit of dust and fuzz. Leaves, blown in when people opened the door. Has quite a pile building by the time he'd poked around in all the tattoo booths, though he knows they'd sparkled that morning. The things people brought in on the soles of their feet!

Head down, musing to himself, he sweeps and sweeps, and doesn't notice the door creaking open.

"Rack?"

To give Rack credit, he doesn't drop the broom. But he does gasp and clutch it to himself, before he recognizes: "Daniel!"

He throws the broom down and launches himself forward, tangling his arms around Daniel. Lifts his face for a hard, hungry kiss, biting at the bottom lip and sucking it into his mouth. Daniel doesn't quite melt in his arms, but softens a little, bending with the flow.

Then Rack draws back and clips Daniel across the ear.

"Ow!" Daniel holds the side of his head, giving Rack kicked puppy eyes. "What was that for?"

"That? Was for keepin' me worried all the day long." Rack jerks his cell phone off his waist and waves it at Daniel. "A call. A word. Something to let me know you weren't packin' up for Hoboken or something."

"You thought I'd leave you?"

Rack sticks his chin out. "What'm I supposed to think? You come over all manly and demand something I won't do, and stomp off like a child in a snit when I say no. That's usually what comes before breaking up, Dan."

This time, Daniel thwaps Rack across the ear. "You idiot," he says lovingly. "Come here. No, I said come here." He wrestles the smaller man into his arms and hugs, hard and firm.

Only when he unbristles, when the fight begins to soothe out of him, does Daniel speak again. "I'm not leaving you. I don't care what you think, or what you nightmare up. I'm staying right here. Got it?"

"But, Dan -"

"No buts. Me. Stay. Here. Understood?"

Rack lets out a long sigh, and buries his face in Daniel's chest. "Love," he says after a moment. "Had me that worried, you did."

"I know. I'm sorry. That's just us, you know? We get mad, we stomp off, but we always come back. I didn't mean to scare you. But I didn't go back home. I spent the afternoon in the park with..." he hesitates... "a sketch pad."

"Oh, no, don't start this up again."

"Rack!" Daniel grabs him by the arms. "Just listen to me, okay? All that stuff about not wanting me to show the full monty was bullshit and I know it, okay? You're possessive, but you're not a caveman. And just because someone looks, doesn't mean they can touch. Look." He draws his fingers down Rack's cheek. "It started off as something I could do for you, for the show, but it turned into so much more. I want this tattoo now, for myself. Whether you take pictures of it or not is your deal. Now, what's wrong with that?"

Rack backs up, folding his arms across his chest. "Dan, you don't know what's the what with cock tattoos. The skin's so thin, and it moves so much. Anything intricate's gonna blur and look awful after just a little while. I tried calling other men, and they wouldn't go for it once they'd heard. I adore your cock. I can't bear thinking to make it ugly. And the pain, love. You don't have to be erect, but I can't fathom the pain you'd be in either way."

"Rack." Daniel steps closer, putting one hand on his shoulder, and another on his waist. "I'm not stupid. Before I made that sketch, I looked up everything I could on cock tattoos. I know it'll hurt, but remember how Luz taught me pain management breathing after I hurt my hand? I can get through this. And the design I drew, it's to specification. It won't blur and get ugly. It's not a snake like you wanted, but..." He pulls back to tug the crumpled drawing out of his pocket and offers it to Rack.

Rack takes it and looks at it, really looks at it, for the first time. An elegant, ornamental vine crowned by a bunch of grapes that would start off behind the flagstaff on Daniel's lower belly. It looked as if the spike is puncturing them. It twines around the skin above the cock, and winds its way down diagonally, piercings setting it off like little clusters of fruit. Spare and elegant. Intricate, scrolling. Crawling up over his thighs, spreading across his hips and down his soft inner thighs. It'll take a lot of ink, and a good long session under the needle.

Hard to do, but not impossible. And simple enough that it won't blur into a mess after a few weeks.

"You thought this through," he says slowly.

"I did." Daniel spreads his hands. "I want to do this. For you, yeah, but for me, too."

Silence.

"So?" Daniel presses. "Will you?"

Rack's fingers tighten on the drawing. "It's late."

"Tonight. Just me and you in here. The way it was when we did my chest piece." Daniel rubs a hand over it. "Quiet, so you can concentrate."

Rack hesitates.

"For me. I'm asking you for it. As my commitment gift."

"Now that's not playing fair."

"Will you do it?" A grin tilts up one corner of Daniel's mouth. "Decorate me up for the big day?"

Rack feels an answering grin tug at his lips. "You know how long we'll have to go without sex while that heals up?"

Daniel crosses the space between them. "We? Nuh-uh. Me. Not you. And I plan to thank you in ways you never even dreamed of." His hand slides down to caress Rack's cock through his jeans. The slight pressure feels like heaven, bringing him instantly to life.

"Really not playing fair."

"All's fair in love and war." Daniel bends to nip at his earlobe. "So? Will you?"

Rack takes one last look at the drawing before it's flattened between them. "All right," he says - and finds himself with two armfuls of eager, excited Daniel, like a puppy happy to see its master. A kissing, licking, biting Daniel, ravenous for the taste of him.

He laughs, kissing back, keeping the sketch safe. It's become a treasure, pulled from the trash. Daniel's created a masterpiece, and he means to make that dream come true.

When Daniel draws back, it's to tug at his hand. "Come on. Let's get started. You can borrow what you need for the piercings from Joey's booth, right?"

Rack lets Daniel drag him along, back to the booth. His lover knows the equipment as well as he does himself, and with a quick adjustment of some levers, fully reclines the chair. With a wink at Rack, he unzips his jeans and skins them off, stepping out. Nothing underneath.

He pauses, running a hand down his cock, flushed and hard. "You ready?"

Rack drops the sketch on the counter and swallows hard. Seeing his lover presented to him so, like a treat on a platter... "You sure we can't go for an appetizer, first?"

"I want to be hard for you."

"Yeah? What about me, being hard for you?" Rack grabs Daniel and pushes him around, facing the counter. "Want you," he breathes into Daniel's ear. "Just like the first time, eh? Me behind you, pounding into that tight little arse."

Daniel's breath quickens.

"You like that, don't you?" Rack drags his own jeans down. His cock falls out into his palm, hard as iron, the piercings tugging with the best sort of pleasurepain. "There's slick in a drawer to your right hand," he whispers. He prods the crease between Daniel's cheeks with the head of his cock. "A fuck. A quick fuck, and I'll do your tattoo. I'll decorate you up and put another mark on you. Make you all the more *mine*."

Daniel's seemingly nerveless hands fumble at the drawer. He scrabbles out a tube of lubricant and reaches backward, slapping it into Rack's hand. Rack flips it open and squeezes out a palm full of the slippery stuff, rubbing it over his cock.

He probes Daniel with eager fingers. His lover's relaxed already, so ready for him that he gapes open, waiting for the intrusion. Rack pushes forward and hisses as the tip of his cock is swallowed by the heat. "Love you," he whispers. "Love you, want you, need you, love you..."

"And you," Daniel says hoarsely. "Fuck me. Ink me. Have me."

And as Rack pushes forward, snapping his hips and burying himself in Daniel's velvet channel, he realizes that he'd been bested despite himself. But who could complain? Not him, when defeat tasted so... very... sweet...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Bill, bill, junk mail, bill, flyer, package from some Artists of The House place, Resident... hey, Dan, you get a bloody lot of mail, you know that?"

"Like you don't!" Daniel calls from the shop. "Anything good in there?"

"Bill, bill... not really, pet."

"Put it all on the shelf, then. It's probably mostly from lumber contractors."

Rack can relate. He gets his own share from ink suppliers, distributors, salesmen, and the lot. He shuffles through a multi-page ad for a furniture warehouse, idly noting that their stuff looks shoddy as hell next to Daniel's good craftsmanship, and a couple more bills.

Hang on a sec. There, at the bottom of the stack, a card. Daniel's name on it, but up in the return address, a word that sets his neck to bristling: "Alex".

Rack grits his teeth. A card to Daniel, eh? Nice paper, too. Not one of those cheap off-the-rack cards. This is the sort you buy in an artsy store. Good, heavy weight to it. You mean something special when you send out a card like that.

And when the someone sending it was your honey's ex-squeeze, that means nothing good.

"Daniel?" he shouts, tossing the rest of the mail willy-nilly on a counter. "You got a card."

He stomps into the shop, tapping his foot while Daniel straight-edges a pile of boards, then shoves the envelope into his face. "From *him*."

Daniel blinks, goes cross-eyed as he tries to focus, and backs off a step or two. "Him who?"

"Alex," Rack spits. "That stupid prick you used to see. He's sending you a high-end card."

"How can you tell?"

"His name's on the bloody thing!"

"No, that it's high-end." Daniel's studying the thing with interest. And, Rack notes with growing irritation, not a bit of aggravation. "This must be one of the cards he makes. I heard he ended up taking a job with the company that wanted him after all."

"Oh, makes them special, does he? And sends one out to you?"

Daniel blinks. "Well, I e-mailed him a while back."

"You bloody what?"

"Well, it was kind of a nyah, nyah, I'm getting committed, look what you missed out on sort of e-mail, if that makes you feel any better."

Rack snatches the envelope back and tears it open. Daniel makes a grab for it. "Hey, that's my mail!"

"Your mail, yeah. From an ex who's all of a sudden interested in making contact." Rack slides the card out of the envelope. "Oh, roses and a violin, very fuckin' sentimental, that."

"Give it here!" Daniel snatches the card back. He opens it, and a small square of parchment, written with heavy black ink, falls out.

He only has time to scan a few lines before Rack grabs it back. "Let's see what lover boy has to say for himself."

Daniel puts his hands on his hips. "Rack... possessive much?"

Rack waves the parchment in the air. "Need a pair of glasses, but here goes." He drops his gaze, and reads:

Daniel,

I lost the right to call you 'dear' a long time ago. I hope you won't think that I'm presuming too much to send you this card. It's my latest. It's a little too cute for my taste, but it sells.

I got your e-mail, and I saved it for - I don't know, days. Reading it over and over again.

Daniel, I'm glad you've found happiness. And you'll hate me for this, but I asked around about this Rack guy, and I know he's a good one. I wouldn't want anything less for you.

I'm still so sorry about the way we parted. If things had gone differently, maybe I would be the one committing myself to you. But you can't change the past, can you?

There should be a parcel in the same day's mail as this card. If not, look for it soon. It's taking a huge liberty, but I made up some blank cards for you and Rack to send out to announce your togetherness.

I wish you all the happiness in the world. Trust me, I mean that.

Still, I hope, your friend -

Alex

Daniel folds his arms across his chest. "Well?"

Rack swallows. Wordlessly passing the parchment back over to Daniel, he crosses to where he's thrown the mail and reaches for the package. Daniel doesn't comment as he tears it open and pulls out a neat box. Inside, through a clear cover, he can see a drawing of two hands enjoined, a tribal design linking the pair of them. In simple, elegant handwriting, they declaim: "Rack & Daniel - Committed Partners".

He puts the box down slowly.

From behind, warm arms encircle him. "See?" Daniel asks softly in his ear. "You don't have to be jealous. Everyone knows that I'm for you, and you're for me."

"Pet..." Rack's hand reaches to grasp Daniel's. "I'm a stupid git, you know that?"

"Yeah. But you're my stupid git." Daniel kisses his earlobe. "Come on. There's still half an hour of lunch left, and I want to show you a few things."

A half-grin tugs at Rack's lips. "These things I want to know, pet?"

"I think so." Daniel's hand moves lower, stroking at Rack's cock. "I'm not all the way healed yet, but your equipment is working fine. More than fine. Besides, I bought this new book the other day - *Top Tips for the Ultimate Bottom* - and - well - let's just say I think you're gonna like a few new tricks I've picked up."

Rack lets himself be tugged along, in the direction of the bedroom. "Tricks, like?"

"Oh, a little massage, a little muscle control..."

"Massage? You want me relaxed, love?"

"Not exactly." Daniel rounds on Rack, and kisses him soundly, nibbling at his lower lip and sucking the top one briefly. "Right now, I want you excited. Really excited. But afterwards, relaxed would be good. Remember what tomorrow is?"

"Tomorrow?" Rack goes back after Daniel's tempting mouth, managing to seize it in a kiss before he pulls away.

"Yeah." Daniel bonks their foreheads together. "Either you forgot, or you're playing the avoidance game. My folks are coming into town. We're having that get-together. Your family and mine. Remember?"

"Oh, God."

Daniel tugs him toward the bedroom. "Once more, with feeling."

"Oh, God."

"Now," Daniel says, pulling Rack toward the bed, "let's see what kind of range you can get into that..."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Rack and Daniel back into the living space above Rack's parlor, laughing between kisses and clutching at one another's shirts with eager hands. The day is over, and the loft bed awaits them. Warm and soft, full of down comforters and blankets, and flannel sheets which might not be sexy but hey, warm.

Daniel manages to free himself from the Racktopus long enough to push his lover up against a wall. He stands there a moment, admiring him. From the tips of his disarranged, spiked hair, to the toes of his battered black boots, Rack is something worthy of adoration. And he's proved himself tonight in more ways than one.

"I think," Daniel says, pressing a hand on Rack's chest to keep him in place, "that you've earned yourself a reward, mister."

Rack grins - that evil, infectious grin that just lets you know he's up for any game you might happen to want to play. "Have I, now?"

"Oh, yeah." Daniel lets his hand slide down Rack's chest, lower and lower, until it rests over the space where the red "X", his mark, resides. "You did me proud."

"Acted just like myself, love."

"That's all I ever want you to be." Daniel trails his finger back up. "Just stand still," he whispers. "Let me do all the work."

"All you?"

"All me," Daniel promises. "Trust me, this is gonna be a night you'll never forget."

Earlier

Rack stands back and stares around his shop. "I said put up one or two of them, not half the damned package!" he shouts.

Rufus sticks his head out of his tattooing booth and grins. "Wasn't my idea."

"Not mine!" Mei-Li calls over the buzzing of her machine.

"I thought of it," Shelly says, at the register. "I mean, come on. You wouldn't let us put up any white crepe paper bells, or streamers, or anything like that."

"Because this is a place of business, you bint!"

"So I figured, since those cards were so nice, we'd decorate with them," Shelly finishes, unruffled. "Daniel stopped by for a cup of coffee. He was sorry he missed you, but he had to go pick his family up at the airport. He liked them."

"I missed Dan?"

"One of the few times in your life together, I'm sure."

Rack swats at her, aimed to miss. Standing back, he stares at the commitment cards dangling from the entrance to every tattoo booth, the piercing room, the register, Amber's set-up, the front doorway...

"Bloody hell."

Amber glances up through a fall of golden hair. Her smile is pure evil. "You're not getting cold feet, are you?"

"About committing to Dan? Hell, no. It's this whole meeting his family that I'm..."

She stands, and crosses to lay a warm hand on his arm. "I understand," she says quietly. "After what your family did. But Daniel's parents know about him. They know about you. They've flown all the way out here to be at your ceremony. It'll be okay. I promise."

Wordlessly, Rack covers her hand with his, and squeezes. "Right. And they'll be here at closing."

"Early closing today," Shelly warns him, with the enthusiasm of someone getting off early.

"Yeah." Rack squeezes Amber's hand again. "It'll be all right. It will."

"Of course it will," she echoes, letting him hold her hand as hard as he wants.

Later

Daniel leans in for a long, lingering kiss, his tongue sweeping across Rack's lower lip, sucking it briefly in, and letting it go with a nip. "I'm gonna treat you right," he murmurs.

Lowering his hands to Rack's shoulders, he slides his them beneath the shoulders of the silk shirt Rack'd put on for the dinner that night. "This goes," he breathes, slipping it off. It flutters to the floor in a pool of indigo.

"This too," Daniel says, pushing his hands beneath Rack's black T-shirt. "Arms up, babe."

Rack lifts his arms. Daniel peels the T off, over his head, and drags it away. It joins the silk, discarded on the rug.

"An' these?" Rack asks, thrusting his pelvis forward.

Daniel grins at him - not playfully, not humorously, but as a Cheshire cat might smile at the next victim in the game. "These," he says, his fingers finding the buttons on Rack's jeans, "yeah, these go too."

Nimble, he undoes the buttons. One by one, until Rack's cock, already half-hard, nudges its way out into his palm. Daniel gives it a single stroke, but moves on, opening the jeans all the way. Placing his hands on Rack's hips, he tugs down, stripping the pants from Rack's body.

"Step out of them," he whispers.

Rack does. Standing there, gloriously nude, while Daniel is still clothed, he looks his lover up and down. "Is this a game for one, or can I play, too?"

"Rack," Daniel says, gliding his hands over his lover's bare legs, "you'll be having too much fun to worry about me."

He gives that grin again. "I promise."

Earlier

"We have food, right?" Rack finishes latching the catches on his private booth. Good God, he hopes Dan's folks won't want a tour of his working space. He's got some mightily compromising pics hung on the wall in there. Gay-accepting they might be, but he doesn't know how well photos of smooching and groping would go down.

"We have food?" he repeats, heading nervously for the table. "I mean, I said potluck. Doesn't mean I ended up with half-a-dozen bowls of chip and dip, does it?"

Mei-Li glances up. "Nope. Thanks for letting me use your oven, by the way."

"Oven? I never said you could - Jesus Christ, what's that?"

She swats him. "Broccoli casserole, you dope. Green stuff. You remember, the kind of thing you pick off your burgers and throw away?"

Rack regards the steaming dish with awe. "You know how to make that?"

"Babe, I am a wiz in the kitchen."

"Luz is coming too, right?" Rack asks anxiously. At least one person he *knows* is on his side...

"Last I heard."

"Better keep her word."

"Rack." Mei-Li leans up to give him a peck on the cheek. "She will. Or she knows I'll give her a

spanking."

"Oh, God. You two - I don't want to know."

Mei-Li cackles evilly as she goes to dispose of her potholders. Amber, evermore his shadow that day, comes to stand at his side. "Everyone came through. Rufus brought gumbo, Toby brought a roasted chicken, Mei-Li did her casserole, Joey made cornbread -"

"Joey made bloody cornbread?"

"Homemade. He made me promise to tell you that. Jalapeno."

"Cornbread," Rack muses, mystified.

"Shelly did bring chips and dip, but we need some munchies, so that's okay. And I brought dessert, see?" She guides him to a plate of brownies, rich and fudgy and thick with chunks of chocolate.

"Amber, love... these aren't 'special' brownies, are they?"

Amber swats him. "Of course not!"

She waits for him to relax before adding: "We put the special stuff in the cookies. Hannah's bringing them."

Rack groans.

"I'm just kidding. She's bringing salad."

"Thank God."

"With special dressing."

"Amber!"

Later

Daniel smiles at Rack, then backs off a step. His hands go to the buttons of his shirt. Slowly, one by one, he undoes them, revealing the tribal tattoo and the glinting silver of his nipple rings. A twist of his shoulders, and the shirt drops to the floor.

Sliding a hand down his belly, he slips it into his pants and strokes. "All for you," he promises. "But later. Right now..."

He unzips, and lets his loose khakis fall. Stepping out of them, clad only in black silk boxers, he leans forward for another kiss. His tongue slips into Rack's mouth, teasingly running his tongue stud around Rack's teeth. Rack takes only a moment to catch up with the action before he's dueling with Daniel, clattering their metal together.

When they draw apart, Rack reaches for the waistband of Daniel's boxers. "Come on, love," he coaxes. "Fair's fair."

Daniel stays his hands. "Not yet," he whispers into the curve of one ear. "That comes later."

Rack strokes Daniel's cock through the thin material. "But I can feel you," he whispers. "All hard an' ready for me. Can't I have just a peek?"

"Not yet." Daniel bites Rack's earlobe, then grasps his arms gently to turn him around. "Up into the loft bed," Daniel orders. "You first. Lie on your stomach."

"Do I get a hint as to what this is all about?" Rack asks - though he does as he's told, walking quickly across the cold floor to the bed's ladder.

As Rack puts one foot on the bottommost rung, he feels the tip of Daniel's finger sliding up the cleft of his ass. "Not yet," Daniel says, amusement heavy in his voice. "But I promise you one thing - you're gonna like it."

Earlier

Luz bumps the door to the shop open with her hip. "I'm guessing the 'Closed' sign doesn't mean us?"

"Babe!" Mei-Li shoves a spoon into her casserole, wipes her hands on her hips, and rushed forward to greet her - dear God - lover. Still and all, Rack has to smile as he watches them try to kiss around the heavy iron pot Luz is balancing, and then each take a handle and heft the thing over to the table.

The table itself is about to groan. Once he'd learned they could sneak up and use Rack's oven, Rufus had gone out and bought a tub of shrimp to add to his gumbo. Toby had used Rack's kitchen to make a no-bake pie. Hannah's salad, heavy - and he does mean heavy - on the greens, the lumpy things, and the croutons, sits square in the middle, surrounded by bottles of dressing that Joey had made a run for. Even Shelly's supplemented her chips-and-dip with a bucket of KFC. There's been a bit of a squabble between her and Toby over the chicken monopoly, but in the end, Rack managed to make peace. Somehow. His nerves are still jangling.

But - "Luz, love, good to see you," he says, slipping one arm around her after she deposits her heavy pot on the table. He pecks her on the cheek. "Takin' care of Mei-Li these days, are you?"

"As much as she'll let me," Luz grins. "That's chili, by the way."

"We've already got gumbo!"

"So? Now we have two soupy things. Daniel's got a huge order of fried fish from the take-out place we all like so much. Better make room for it. And his mom brought a tuna casserole all the way out on the plane. Plus an upside-down cake his dad made."

The butterflies in Rack's stomach do cartwheels. "Dan's family is here?"

"Getting stuff out of the car right now. They'll be in here any second now." Luz winks at him. "Hey,

put on a happy face."

"I'll happy face you, you cow."

"Language," she scolds.

The doorbell jangles.

Daniel pokes his face in, wreathed with smiles. "Rack, they're here! You ready to meet the family?"

Rack's throat goes dry. "Ready," he croaks.

Later

Rack lies on his stomach on the flannel sheets. Daniel's shoved all the puffy comforters out of the way, some of them falling clear off the bed itself. "We won't need them," he promises.

From behind himself, Rack smells a sudden, fresh scent of talcum powder. He twists his head back to look. Daniel's coating his hands in the stuff, turning them a pale white. Dan grins. "So they'll be soft for you," he says quietly. "Now turn around, and lay still."

There are questions Rack wants to ask, but he hears a note of steel in Daniel's voice. Meekly, he lays on his stomach. He gives the slightest of jumps as those talcum-soft hands begin stroking down his legs, massaging the tight muscles in his calves.

"Gonna make you feel good," Daniel promises, working each tendon until it's loose and soft. He moves up Rack's legs, to the thighs, but aside from a soft brush over Rack's cock, running his finger down the underside and tweaking at the guiche, he leaves it well alone.

Rack wriggles on his stomach. His cock's so hard it's digging into the bed, and with the piercings, that's uncomfortable. "Dan, love, let me turn over."

"Sssh." Daniel rests one hand on his head briefly. The talcumed hands turn to working on his back, unkinking the knots and taut spots. "In a minute. Right now, let me make you happy..."

Earlier

Daniel bounds in the door of the shop, pausing only long enough to hold it open with his elbow for the next arrival. His arms full of a foil-wrapped platter, he nudges it into an open spot on the table, then flings himself into Rack's arms. Startled, Rack hugs him back, then finds himself being thoroughly kissed.

As ever, he melts straight into it. Can't help it. The sight, the smell, the taste of his Dan... intoxicating. He could stand there and kiss his lover all day, he could...

Laughter breaks out behind them. "See?" Luz cracks. "I told you they were joined at the hip."

Rack yelps and flinches back. Daniel grabs him by the waist. "It's only my family," he says softly.

"They want to meet you. So, c'mon."

Rack holds back. Daniel tugs at his waistband. "Come *on*," he insists.

A group of three strangers stand by the doorway. Shelly and Mei-Li are taking plates and platters from them, finding places on the creaking table to fit them in. A tall man with a long, pointed chin and rumpled blond hair. A small, lithe woman with hair and eyes the color of Daniel's, like chocolate and good whiskey. A lean, lanky young man, his hands on his hips and a shit-eating grin plastered on his face.

"Rack," Daniel says, dragging him over, "this is my Dad, Andy - my mom - Jenny, and my brother - Tom."

From somewhere deep inside, Rack summons up a bit of his swagger. Sticking out his hand, he shakes with Andy first, then Tom, then makes for Jenny.

She stops him in his tracks by snapping her hand up, dangling a rock in front of his face. Rack's eyes cross just a bit as he tries to focus on it. "Uh... Daniel's mum, hello?" he tries.

"Do you know what this is?" she demands.

Rack steals a terrified glance at Daniel, who only looks amused. "A rock?"

"A rock." She makes a disgusted noise. "It's a rose quartz. It has healing properties."

"Oh, how pretty!" Amber exclaims. Jenny glances at her, and she blushes, turning her attention back to arranging tongs in Hannah's salad.

"Well," Jenny says, "at least one person around here knows about quartz. You have her teach you sometime." She releases the lump of pink quartz, dangling on the end of a chain. Rack takes it and slips it over his head, hoping that's what he's supposed to do. "Wear it. I want you in good health for my boy."

"Keep him happy in and out of bed," Tom cracks.

"Tom!"

Daniel blushes. "Dad? This is Rack," he says hurriedly.

Andy steps a little closer, examining Rack carefully, from top to toe. Slowly, he grins. "Daniel," he says, "is gonna have his hands full with this one."

"More like Rack's gonna have his hands full of Daniel."

"Tom!"

Andy laughs. Throwing back his head, he begins to croon: "When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's *amore*..."

"Dad!" Daniel turns scarlet. "He has this thing about singing," he explains in a mutter to Rack. "But that means he likes you."

Daniel tugs at Rack's new necklace. "Congratulations, babe. I think you're a hit."

"Hit, schmit," Tom butts in. "Let's eat!"

"Man after my own heart," Mei-Li agrees.

"If this table Daniel made and brought over doesn't break first."

"You made this?" Andy runs his hand down the side of the multi-leafed table. "You've come a long way from whittling ducks, haven't you?"

"Dad, you saw my shop."

"Are we gonna eat or what?" Tom pounds Rack on the back. "Welcome to the family. You gotta know what's important around here."

Jenny grins at him. "And that's getting out of Tom's way before he eats your hand instead of the food."

And Rack, surrounded by his tattoo family and Daniel's family, not a cross word or look or feeling among the bunch, can't help himself. He throws his head back and laughs; crows for sheer delight.

Later

"Okay," Daniel whispers. "You can turn over, now."

With a groan of relief, Rack rolls over on the sheet. His cock, achingly hard, lies flat against his belly. "Touch me," he begs in a whisper. "Not soft, like you've been doing. Love me rough, Dan. Mark me as yours."

"Oh, I will." Kneeling above him, Daniel reaches to the sides of his black silk boxers and finds buttons that Rack hadn't seen hidden there. A quick pull, and they're off, tossed over the side. Daniel, too, is hard and needy, wet at the tip, dark and lustful.

"I'll mark you as mine," he says, running a finger over Rack's scarlet 'X'. "But you mark me, too. We're in this together, Rack. Families combined, you and me mixed into one person."

"Yeah," Rack whispers. "So happy, Dan - so happy -"

"You're about to be even happier." Daniel takes Rack's hand, and guides it to his ass. Questing fingers find a toy already in place, stretching and lubricating him. "Pull it out," Daniel murmurs. "I want you in there instead."

Rack's hands go nerveless, but he tugs. The toy, thick and bulky, slithers out of Daniel. He tosses it

away. "All ready for me," he says softly. "That's my boy."

"Always your boy."

Rack lets a little of his cockiness into his grin. "So," he says, reaching back into the past for some magic words, "You wanna fuck, or what?"

"Fuck," Daniel says, kneeling over Rack's cock and taking it into his hands, guiding it into his entrance. "Definitely, definitely fuck."

Rack's cock sinks into Daniel's hot, velvet tunnel, plunging deep inside him. Both men groan as he penetrates, feeling the piercings probe within. Rack grips Daniel by the hips. "Gonna drive me crazy, love."

"That," Daniel says, raising up until just Rack's tip is inside, "was the idea." He slides back down, drawing sharp breaths from both.

And like a he-demon, he moves over Rack, pulling up and pushing back, milking that cock. In the hazy midst of pleasure, Rack reaches for Daniel's cock, fisting it and jacking hard. They grow loud, the sounds of their delight filling the room. *More, more, more. Harder, harder!*

Rack's vision grows fuzzy. "Gonna come," he chokes. "You, with me. Come on, then. Come with me."

"Already - there -"

Rack grips Daniel's hips and thrusts up hard, his orgasm uncoiling at the base of his spine and rocketing through him. He comes deep inside Daniel, feeling the heat of his own seed bathing his cock, just as he feels the wash of Daniel's come spilling over his lower belly, coating the scarlet 'X'.

Panting, Daniel drops onto his forearms. He reaches up to give Rack a kiss - the weary, satisfied kiss of the well-fucked. "Well?" he asks against Rack's lips. "How did you like your reward?"

Rack slips out of Daniel in a wash of come. He dips a finger into the pool on his belly, and sucks it between his lips. "It was," he says, "delicious." Then he laughs. "They liked me, Dan. They really liked me."

"They did." Daniel kisses him again. "But not as much as I love you. You're mine, Rack. Marked and sealed and everything except committed, and that happens soon."

"Very soon." Avoiding the wet spot, Rack draws Daniel down to cuddle next to him. "Just a few days, now."

"Yep." Daniel curls into Rack's warmth. "A few days, and we're together forever."

"Love," Rack says into Daniel's hair, meaning it with all his heart: "Binding myself to you? I can't bloody wait."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Daniel's laying with his head in Rack's lap, idly playing with the lacing ties on his sweatpants, while Rack reads - or tries to read - the funny pages and to hunt for his ad in today's edition. "On page twenty-four, the buggers," he grumbles. "Down and to the left. No one's gonna look there."

"Like you don't already have a backlog for weeks," Daniel snarks back. "Tell me again why you need to drum up more business?"

"Pet." Rack thumps him, ever so gently. "A businessman *always* needs to drum up more. How d'you keep your shop running."

Daniel blushes. "Ads."

"And you don't have a backlog, yourself?"

"Okay, okay, point taken." Daniel nuzzles into Rack's crotch. "Trying it on a different note. There are other, better things we could be doing with our time."

Rack grins, tongue behind his teeth. "You had ideas?"

"Uh-huh. They start with me untying that knot with my teeth, and get a whole lot more interesting from there."

"How much more interesting? I'm feelin' lazy, pet."

"Well, I could scoot those pants down, and give you a long, slow blowjob, right here and now. Or you could actually get up, take me to bed, and screw me like tomorrow's never gonna come."

Rack hardens under Daniel's cheek, but his hands are still gentle as he pets his lover's hair. "That's none such a bad idea, love."

"We only have a couple days left."

"Until the ceremony, yep."

"So we should get our sex in now. After all, we're going to be celibate the night before the wedding."

"Celi-what?" Rack yelps. He jumps so that he dislodges Daniel, who sits up, offended.

"It's bad luck to see the groom the night before the wedding, dumbass," Daniel says, rubbing his jaw. "And since we have two grooms, double bad luck."

Rack stares at him. "That's a superstition."

"Prove it."

"An old wives' tale."

"Old wives can be pretty wise."

"You serious about this? About the whole -" Rack waves his hands. "For real? No bouncy-bouncy the night before?"

"Nope. None."

"Aw, Daniel!"

"That's why now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their countries." He turns his tattooed back to Rack. "Come on, let's take a trip. You have the map right here."

Rack lays his hands on Daniel. They're gentle, at first, but Daniel can feel the tension thrumming underneath. "Love," he says, very kindly, "if you think I'm giving you up for a night, especially the night when I'll be going crazy with built-up tension, you're mad. I'd planned to give you the coring of a lifetime that night, topped only by the one right after the ceremony. We won't have any of this celibacy crap, not while I'm half of the equation."

"But the bad luck," Daniel protests. "I don't wanna start this off wrong."

"Supposed to be bad luck to wear black, too, isn't it? And we're both gonna be in black."

"Black robes, holy ones, that Hannah ordered."

"An' we're getting' black tattooed on our hands."

"That's different. Those are our rings. Stop trying to confuse me with logic."

"Is it working?" Rack's hands rub small circles down Daniel's back.

"Maybe."

"Good."

Rack flips Daniel over, pinning him on his back on the couch, and begins a slow, lazy exploration of his lover's chest. He nibbles kisses across every bit of the tribal tattoo, bites and tweaks at Daniel's nipples until they stand up tall and proud for him, and licks a lazy stripe down the "M I N E" flagpole as far as he can before hitting sweatpants.

"Are you convinced now?"

"Maybe," Daniel says, his voice reluctant but his eyes sparkling. "Keep going, and I'll let you know."

Rack growls. "Was this all a game to get me moving?"

"I'm not tellin'."

"Why, you little minx," Rack says in admiration as he peels the sweatpants away, dragging his tongue down the length of Daniel's cock, swirling it around and around as if Daniel's the best-quality ice-cream.

Screw celibacy. As if either of them would give this up!

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

"Family!" Daniel comes to fling himself down on the bed next to Rack. "Gotta love 'em, but man, am I glad when they head back to the hotel for the night."

"Gotta love that they're not stayin' here, much better," Rack says absently.

"I mean, seeing Mom and Dad and Tom after all this time is just fantastic, you know? But twelve hours a day is enough." Daniel wiggles around, reaching to caress Rack's hip. "Makes me start to feel like a horny teenager, waiting for bedtime just so I can get off."

"Mmm."

"Rack!" Daniel realizes, for the first time, that his lover's immersed in a spiral-bound notebook, with pages spread out over the nightstand beside the bed. "Hello? Time for paperwork, earlier. Nookie time, now."

"In a sec, love."

"In a sec?" Daniel sits upright and snatches the notebook from Rack's hands. "Seating arrangements? I'm offering you the opportunity to pluck, twist, rub, or suck anything you want, and you'd rather go over seating arrangements?"

Rack has the grace to look embarrassed. "Well, with the ceremony just a day off -"

Daniel tosses the notebook over his side of the bed. "Uh-uh. No more of that. Besides, you know that crowd. They're gonna plop down wherever they see fit, or where they can fit. And there won't be that many. My family -" he reaches for one of Rack's hands, and sucks a finger into his mouth - "your family."

"Dan," Rack groans. "Can't think when you do that."

"Good. Don't think, then. Just do." Daniel suckles on another finger, winding his tongue around it. He lets go with a wet *pop*. "Imagine what I could do if someone would move those papers off their lap and let me get at the good stuff."

Rack gazes down at him, heavy-lidded. "Oh, yeah? And just what would someone do?"

"Well," Daniel says, matching word to action, "he might just pull down these sweatpants - lift up, yeah, just like that - and stare at that beautiful, decorated cock for a long minute. All those piercings, shiny in the light. He might think about bending his head down and tugging at - each -"

one - with his lips."

Rack lets go of his pen. "Daniel." His hands come down to tangle through Daniel's hair.

"He might just," Daniel goes on, "take that thick, purple head into his mouth and start giving the blowjob of a lifetime..."

"Daniel!" Rack bucks up as Daniel begins to suck, to lick, to tug at each piercing as his lips glide past them. Eager, questing fingers seek out his guiche and tug at it, then press up.

"Daniel, enough!" Rack manages to pull Daniel off him, albeit reluctantly. "Not yet. I've something else in mind. It's been what, a couple weeks now since we did your prick tattoo?"

Daniel's smile shines from Rack's juices, and gleams with a wicked light. "I'm all healed up," he says proudly. "It looks gorgeous. Like I'm a dryad, stepped out of the trees, blessed by Priapus. The pain was so worth it, Rack. Why? Want to see?"

"Want to see, yes," Rack says, voice husky. "Want to touch. Want to feel that from the inside." He reaches for the waistband of Daniel's boxers, pulling them down. Daniel wiggles, helping him with his task. "Ahhh... it is beautiful. You do look like a god. So hard, so thick. You ready for me, love?"

Daniel rolls Rack over, tugging his sweatpants off. He parts Rack's legs, grinning at his lover. "Baby," he says huskily, "Thought you'd never ask."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

It's a very special day.

The doors to the tattoo parlor are locked, and a "CLOSED" sign hangs firmly in the window. No cars in the lot save for those of the employees, Daniel's and his family's, and Rack's bike.

The air is cold outside, with a bite that promises snow, but inside it's warm. Ranged about on couches and chairs, knee to knee and hip to hip, both families sit together and watch as the commitment ceremony unfolds. Joey is next to Jenny is next to Tom is next to Toby is next to Andy.

A pole, wound around and about with ribbons, leans up against the wall. Mei-Li and Luz held it while Rack and Daniel wove it together, symbolizing the joining of their lives. Pure colors, bright and solid and sure, mixing together in a glorious symphony.

On a small table, a loaf of bread and a cup of wine sit. They've bitten from the same loaf, and drunk from the same cup, promising fidelity.

In the middle of the room, another table sits. Daniel made it especially for the occasion, with ornate scrollwork on the sides and sculpted legs. Sturdy but beautiful, solid but lovely. Cedar, sending up a rich smell that perfumes the air.

Daniel sits on one side of the table, and Rack on the other. Both have their hands outstretched, laid flat on the surface. On one side, Rufus bends over Rack's wrist, and on the other Mei-Li leans over Daniel's hand. Cords trail away from the table, leading to plugs in the tattooing booths.

Both Rufus and Mei-Li wield a tattoo machine on tender flesh, going over the barely-visible lines left from Amber's henna. Rufus began with the wrist and worked his way up; Mei-Li began with the hand and worked her way down. Both are saving the fingers, the rings, for last.

Jenny cranes her neck to see better. Her eyes are suspiciously damp, and Tom nudges her to hand her a Kleenex. Under his breath, Andy is humming the wedding march, and no one thumps him to shut him up. Joey leans forward, his eyes intense, watching the progress of the tattoos.

Amber sits to one side, gently thumping bones against a one-sided drum, crooning a song in a language no one knows. Arabic? Celtic? They're not sure. But it's a blessing upon this marriage, and the ululating tones of it soothe them all. They sway gently, caught in the rhythm.

Beneath the table, Rack and Daniel's free hands grip one another. Fingers gently nudge at each other, playing, loving with what they can.

Hannah sits opposite Amber, dressed in robes of pure white linen. With chalk, she's drawn a pentagram with the table in its circle, and lit candles of different colors at each of the points. She holds a heavy, ancient, leather-bound book in her hands, waiting patiently for the tattoo work to finish.

Mei-Li and Rufus draw neck and neck, working now on the rings. Beneath the table, Rack and Daniel tighten hands. It's painful, but love hurts, and through the hurt, they grow a stronger bond.

Finally, both sighing, the tattoo artists lay their machines down. The ink is done, an ornate design winding up the fingers and down the wrists, with a solid band round-about the middle finger.

"It's finished," Mei-Li says quietly. Pushing back her chair, she holds Daniel's hand up. Rufus mirrors the action with Rack. Pressing the men's palms together, they let them intertwine fingers.

They smile at each other, nervous but happy.

On the couch, Jenny begins to sniffle. Joey puts his arm around her.

Amber finishes her song, and lays down her drum. Hannah leans forward, earnestness written on every line of her face, and says: "Do you understand what you pledge yourself to?"

"Me to thee, and thee to me," Rack murmurs, holding Daniel's hand tightly.

"Me to thee, and thee to me," Daniel repeats.

"Forever and forevermore," Hannah chants. "To live as one, to die as one, to be as one. Do you make this pledge?"

"I do," Rack whispers.

"I do," Daniel returns, with a smile meant for Rack alone.

"Exchange your gifts. Your tokens of good faith for this relationship."

Daniel lifts his hand out from underneath the table and reaches for an envelope sitting to one side. He pushes it toward Rack. "It's a deed," he says. "For half the woodshop. And a check for half of all that I own, including the house where we'll live."

Rack's eyes grow suddenly damp. He pushes another envelope toward Daniel. "Great minds think alike, pet," he says. "It's a deed to half of the tattoo parlor. And half of what I own as well, down to the bloody bike."

Hannah can't restrain a smile as she watches. "Do you accept these tokens?"

"I do," Daniel says, chiming in a split second after Rack.

"Do you promise to love one another, to care for one another, to be there when no one else will lend

a hand?"

"I do," they echo each other.

Their fingers wrap tightly around one another. Their free hands steal forward, and twine together as well.

"Then I declare that you are committed to one another," Hannah says gently. "Kiss your mate, and seal your pact."

Before the words are fully out of her mouth, Daniel and Rack are leaning forward, ghosting their lips across one another's. A pause, and they return for a second kiss - deeper, more loving, full of the passion that they share.

A tear runs down Amber's cheek. "Bless you," she murmurs. The words are caught up and run around the shop in a chorus: "Bless you, bless you, bless you."

Rack and Daniel part, eyes shining. "We did it," Daniel says softly.

Rack grins, a flicker of his cockiness passing over his features. "That we did, pet. We've made it, you and me."

"Together."

"So, then. What's our next glorious adventure?"

"First? Lunch. And after that, how about we find out?"

Rack squeezes Daniel's hand. "That sounds fine to me, love. Just fine."

And so, together, they do.

THE END